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# Blog Post #3: Websleuths: Information Behavior and Needs

Edit

Posted on September 30, 2020 by Corrina

\*\*\*Quick note that in my first blog post I used the term "citizen detective". Moving forward I will use the term websleuth.\*\*\*

Websleuths (also known as citizen detectives and internet detectives/sleuths) are an interesting group to study as an information community, particularly when considering their information behavior —“the many ways in which human beings interact with information” (Bates, 2017, p. 2074)—and their information needs. Most information behavior models take for granted that the information that would satisfy the user’s information need is available. These models generally fall in to two camps that either emphasize information exposure or proactive information seeking (Case & Givens, eds., 2016, p. 144). Websleuths are active information seekers with a definite and defined information need, but absolutely no assurance that the information they seek exists. So, while “the concept of ‘information need’ remains ambiguous in the [LIS] literature” (Naumer & Fisher, 2017, p. 2116), it is the information result for websleuths that can prove nebulous. Nevertheless, websleuths’ information behavior and needs can best be explored by employing Anders Hektor’s model of Human Information Behavior as it pertains to the framework of serious leisure—in fact, this model fits quite well.

Serious leisure, as defined by Stebbins, is “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and expertise” (2009, p. 622). A prime example of this is Barbara Rae-Venter, who started out as an amateur genealogy hobbyist helping her cousin and then went on to assist law enforcement solve a number of cold cases, including the Golden State Killer and the Bear Brook Murders, by using her masterful genetic sleuthing skills (Murphy, 2018).

As Hartel et al. assert, Hektor’s model of Human Information Behavior lends itself particularly well to developing a framework around the information behavior of serious leisure activities because it: centers on people’s every day, outside of work lives; the model is microsocial, meaning it incorporates the social world of the user; and it prioritizes information seeking and searching behavior (2016, p. 4). Additionally, “Hektor widened the lens to include how information is used, created, and shared—a substantially more complete, inclusive, and realistic conception of information behaviour [sic] that suggests a more capable and empowered human being” (2016, p. 4). I think this is an important lens to use because websleuths are a very robust information community, whose members are very active and involved information users, creators, and sharers. Put differently, websleuths “are active meaning-makers. Their activities are in constant dialogue with – and reflective of – other social phenomena” (Yardley et al., 2016, p. 86). And while they may do the majority of their research alone, that research is often shared with their community by a variety of means and with law enforcement—if they’re receptive.

As Hartel et al. did with the case studies in their article, Information activity in serious leisure (2016), I am going to outline websleuths’ information behavior by employing Hektor’s eight information activities: search and retrieve; browse; monitor; unfold; exchange; dress; instruct; and publish. The definitions included are from the glossary of Hektor’s book, *What’s the use: Internet and information behavior in everyday life* (2001).

**Search and Retrieve:** Searching and retrieving “is an active and directed effort of recovering *information* or making it newly available, involving some searchable *information system*” (2001, p. 314). It is aligned with the seeking portion of Hektor’s information behavior framework. Websleuths employ a variety of information systems to recover information, but the internet is decidedly the most used system, as it is for the majority of information seekers. However, depending on the age of the case they are researching, and the type of information needed, websleuths make use of the many resources provided by libraries, archives, special collections libraries, and government records offices to access documents such as phone or yearbooks, newspaper articles not available on the Internet, census data, property information (titles, liens, lines), marriage licenses, and a number of other records.

**Browse:** Browsing is “an act of moving in a limited environment, with some level of perceived probability to encounter a resource of some value” (2001, p. 309), and is part of the seeking and gathering part of information behavior. While the internet at large is useful for websleuths in the searching and retrieving stage, there are specific websites that they regularly visit: [The Charley Project](#); [NamUs](#); [The Doe Network](#); [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#); [Websleuths.com](#); and [the Reddit Bureau of Investigation](#).

**Monitor:** Monitoring is an information gathering behavior and can be described as “Recurrent meetings with familiar *sources* and services, where the sources turned to are intentional, and the information gathered is incidental. [It], in part, reaffirms the agent by providing a stable and predictable form, and in part, supplies valued *information*” (2001, p. 312). I would argue that monitoring really comes into play when a websleuth is actively researching and investigating a specific case. A websleuth may monitor various social media accounts or forum posts that are dedicated to a case, victim, or missing person; they may follow journalists, trusted news outlets, and/or podcasts that report or document the case; some websleuths may form working relationships with investigators or other websleuths and they may regularly check-in with each other as they research a case or disappearance.

**Unfold:** Unfolding, an information gathering and communicating behavior, is “continually directed attention towards *information* in order to take part in content” (2001, p. 314). This is an interesting phase as this is where the actual engagement with the content happens. For websleuths, unfolding can take a number of forms and is wide-ranging: listening to recordings (911 calls, interviews with suspects if made available); watching news coverage; listening to podcasts; reading forum posts; reading books, articles, diaries, letters. Unfolding is where websleuths follow their own “red thread of information” to see where it leads.

**Exchange:**  
Exchanging  
“Represents the bi-directional acts of  *dressing* and  *unfolding* in an ongoing reciprocal process” and is characterized as an information communication behavior (2001, p. 310). Websleuths exchange their theories with one another and others by posting or commenting on forums. They may also engage by email with journalists, podcast hosts, investigators, and other websleuths. Yardley et al note interesting findings about the “multidirectional communication flows between websleuths and mainstream media organizations,” where content that first appeared in a websleuthing space makes its way into print or online media sources and vice versa (2018, pp. 102-103).

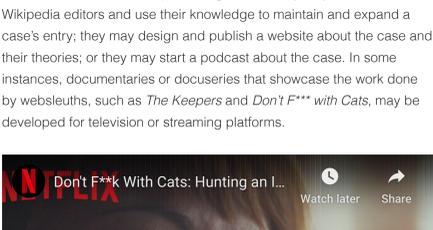


Abbie Schaub and Gemma Hoskins in *The Keepers*. (Netflix).

**Dress:** Dressing is an information communicating and giving behavior and is “The suggested label for activities where *information* is expressed by an individual” (2001, p. 309). More simply put, dressing is like organizing collected information, sometimes in preparation for presentation. For a websleuth, this might mean collecting and re-visiting their notes; creating timelines; drawing maps or marking important locations on a map; or in some way compiling information.

**Instruct:** Instructing, an information giving behavior, is “an activity of imparting *information* and making one’s wishes known to others or making statements. The giving is social but unidirectional from the individual to an anonymous or generalized counterpart, which may be an institution, a representative of an institution, or an automated *information system*” (2001, p. 312). Websleuths perform instructing when they share their findings and theories with investigators or law enforcement responsible for a case, other websleuths, journalists, or podcast hosts.

**Publish:** Publishing is an information giving behavior and is the act of “[announcing] or [posting] formally or in public. It relates to some particular *source* and is directed to the public expected to encounter that source. The recipients of this information can be on any level, from an unspecified community to the general public” (2001, p. 313). Publishing for a websleuths can be as informal as creating a new thread on a forum or as formal as publishing a book; they may be active Wikipedia editors and use their knowledge to maintain and expand a case’s entry; they may design and publish a website about the case and their theories; or they may start a podcast about the case. In some instances, documentaries or docuseries that showcase the work done by websleuths, such as *The Keepers* and *Don’t F\*\*\* with Cats*, may be developed for television or streaming platforms.



Yardley et al. collected interesting data pertaining to websleuths’ activities as referenced by media sources; the three most common activities of a websleuth all relate to information: analyzing content, looking for information, and discovering information (2018, p. 99). Additionally, their findings highlight the fact that websleuths employ a number of online spaces in all aspects of their information behavior: Reddit; Facebook; Twitter; blogs; and so on (2018, p. 95). All of this is to say, simply, that websleuths are active information seekers with a defined information need, who communicate and share their information in a variety of ways, primarily online. And while armchair detectives are nothing new, the ubiquity of the internet has ushered in this new generation of websleuths with expanded access to information and information sharing.

### References

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This entry was posted in INFO 200, Information community, websleuths and tagged information behavior, information need. Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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## 2 thoughts on “Blog Post #3: Websleuths: Information Behavior and Needs”

 **Michael Stephens** says: October 7, 2020 at 3:51 pm (Edit)

This post will work well remixed right into your research paper. So cool to see Hektor’s work applied to the web sleuths.

Reply

 **Sarah Rainey** says: October 9, 2020 at 2:56 am (Edit)

Thoroughly enjoyed this analysis, I used Hektor too and it’s informative to see it applied to such a different activity.

Reply

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