

A Methodology for Studying the Information Seeking

Behavior of Catholic Clergy

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Abstract

This paper describes the construction of a set of interview questions to be used for discovering the information seeking behavior of Catholic clergy. It acknowledges previous findings, which indicate that clergy very infrequently consult library resources to fulfill their information needs. Instead of asking clergy about their *information* needs, the study team asks about *decisions* clergy make and about the resources they consult when making these decisions. The study looks at seven different responsibilities of clergy: Preaching, Teaching, Care Giving, Administering, Conducting Service/Liturgy, Counseling, and Reflecting/Engaging in Personal Development. The study differentiates between time spent executing a responsibility and time spent gathering the necessary information to do so. Initial findings indicate that clergy rely primarily on their personal resources and personal contacts to satisfy their information needs. Only one has mentioned the use of a library in the process of information gathering.

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The opportunity to discover the information seeking behaviors of any person or group has great appeal for librarians who devote their professional careers to uniting people with the information they need, want, and seek. These librarians face many challenges to the success of their efforts.

One such challenge is the verifiable fact that many information seekers place libraries and librarians at the very bottom of their information gathering strategies, preferring instead to consult their own files, the files of friends and neighbors, the Internet, and other official documents and regulations before considering possibilities at formal information agencies. When consulting formal information agencies, only if their own retrieval efforts at the agencies fail, do they consult a librarian or information professional. Clearly, in the cases of seekers who behave in this manner, libraries do not intrude on their consciousnesses, probably because librarians have not succeeded in making their institutions and their wares *seductive* enough to prompt them to trade their most precious commodity, their time, for what the information place offers.

We choose this word *seductive* because we believe it delivers an essential message to those information workers who desire to achieve and maintain visibility in their communities. We acknowledge Roger Greer and Martha Hale, founders of the Community Analysis Research Institute, and Ernest DeProspero and Chuck McClure, pioneer researchers of library performance, and renowned researchers such as Brenda Dervin for supplying much of what is known about information seeking and information services. We need to put into practice some of their teachings. If libraries are ever to

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maintain seductiveness, if ever they are to convince people to trade their most precious commodity—their time—for what libraries have to offer, they will have to plug into the value systems of their clients. Community Analysis gives us a start, Needs Assessment furthers the cause, and aggressive information provision and evaluation help complete the process of intruding positively upon the consciousnesses of information consumers.

Another challenge is galloping new ignorance (Curran and Adams, 1999), a condition that describes attitudes which tend to discount libraries. That myths, not realities, and confusion, not accurate perception, may drive such attitudes (Darnton, 2011), appears to be the case. What results is what matters, and what matters seems to be that for many consumers of information, libraries do not matter.

We wanted to study the information seeking behaviors of Catholic clergy, to determine whether libraries and librarians figured in these processes, and to develop an instrument which would enable us to make such discoveries. We believed that the results of such a study could be of use to clergy, seminary instructors and librarians, and to special and public librarians who serve clergy and who would be interested in exploring ways to better do so. We chose Catholic clergy because efforts to study the information seeking behaviors of Protestant clergy have been reported in the literature. Catholic clergy were included in one study we read, the data for which were collected via questionnaires. We decided to construct and employ an interview instrument, believing that this method would yield useful results because it would permit exchanges and discovery essential for our study, which owing to the absence of such research reporting, would be substantially *pioneering*.

Literature Consulted

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Three discoveries quickly presented themselves. First was that the best and most persuasive reporting in this area had been conducted by Joshua Lambert, Kevin and Vicki L. Smith, and Daniel Roland and Don A. Wicks. The second was that these researchers tended to include many of the same sources in their own literature reviews. The third was that these researchers were finding similar results—that there was agreement among their respective studies (Lambert, 2010; Smith and Smith, 2001; and Roland and Wicks, 2009). Another study was of special relevance because although it involved only one respondent, it delved into an area of genuine interest in this the Information Age—the use of the Internet by a minister of a conservative evangelical Protestant church (Michels, 2009).

From an inspection of these sources several findings emerged:

- Infrequent use of public libraries
- Heavy reliance on personal sources
- Heavy reliance on networks of colleagues
- More use of formal information channels (print, Internet) for preaching
- More use of informal channels when engaging in administration
- Frequent recourse to official denominational websites and documents
- Considerable dialogue with congregations
- Frequent use of Lectionary for preaching
- Heaviest use of print resources associated with preaching function
- First choice associated with preaching and care giving is scripture
- Information overload, (help and hindrance phenomenon) leads to frustration

Preparing to Conduct Our Study

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In addition to wanting to explore issues raised in the literature search, we chose to come at the problem from a different angle. While our study would be about information needs and information seeking behavior, we chose to make decision-making, not information seeking, the central focus of our effort. We did this because we are librarians who understand that while information need is a concept talked about, learned, and understood in precise detail by born-again, stamped on the forehead graduates of programs of library and information science accredited by the American Library Association, it is not a concept that is often grasped and discussed by our lay brethren and sistren. The question: “What are your information needs?” can draw blank stares. So to avoid the vacant looks we chose first to ask about the decisions clergy make in connection with their responsibilities and second to ask what resources they relied upon for help with their decisions. We wanted not to be *librarians asking about books* but to be researchers asking about what clergy think they need in order to make good decisions. If that “what” would turn out to be information, that would be the stuff of discovery. We would find out if they made connections between their daily routines and formal or informal information seeking processes.

We decided to select our respondents from among ordained Catholic priests. These men would have had at least four years of college and four years at seminary before ordination. Diocesan priests, who generally serve in parishes, take vows of celibacy and obedience. We wondered if this obedience factor, which involves adherence to hierarchically imposed directives, would in any way make priests circumspect about providing answers to questions from outsiders. As of this writing, we have found them

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more cautious about participating in the informed consent ritual than about answering our questions.

Speaking of informed consent, because our project involved human subjects, the University of South Carolina required participation in human subjects training and testing, and the acquisition of a certificate of successfully completed study. Part of this training required the composition and approval of an informed consent document that must be read to and signed by all respondents. A copy is included in this report as Appendix A. One respondent refused to sign the document but willingly responded to all questions, complimented us on the quality of the interview questions, and thanked us for the opportunity to participate! The confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, secrecy, and the “you are free to decline to answer any or all of these items” aspects of the informed consent process have raised red flags for some respondents, and we suspect it has made some fearful of the *interrogation* to follow.

Our first order of business was to determine what we wanted to find out and what we would do with the findings. What we wanted to find out was driven substantially by the findings from our literature review and by our point of view. Our point of view was to come at this from a decision-making-in-connection-with-responsibilities perspective. Whereas most of the previous researchers had used three occupational responsibility categories: Preaching, Administration, and Care Giving, we chose to use those and added four others: Teaching, Conducting Service/Liturgy, Counseling, and Reflecting/Engaging in Personal Self-Development.

We decided that the word library would appear nowhere on our instrument.

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We decided that we wanted to distinguish between what respondents considered to be their most important responsibilities and the amount of time they spent preparing for and executing those responsibilities.

We also knew that in order to be successful we had to make sure that the questions we asked were understandable and that they would help us discover what we wanted to know. So we composed the draft of items and pre-tested it. We asked associates each question and then inquired, “What does this question mean to you?” Then we conducted more formal reviews with colleagues versed in interview procedures, making modifications in the instruments as we progressed through pre-testing. Finally, we pre-tested the interview document with ordained clergy, determined that the interview items were understandable, that they yielded desired results, and that the process took thirty minutes or less. The interview document, minus the spaces provided to record responses, is included in this report as Appendix B.

One of the limitations of interview processes is that respondents may have little time for reflection. One can linger on and reflect about items on an e-mailed or snail-mailed questionnaire, but the interview calls for immediate responses. Two of our interview items asked respondents to rank the seven responsibilities. To facilitate this ranking and to allow some time for thought, we asked our question and then handed our respondents the lists of the seven items. As of this writing, the respondents have so far been able to complete the rankings. One respondent, however, ranked several of the responses equally. Respondents have been able to deal promptly with each item, and we have been asked only once to provide an example to illustrate a meaning.

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Findings

As our study progresses, we continue to add findings to our project, findings which add to and widen the range of decision activities. We are assured of achievement in one important area: This procedure does provide a workable and useful mechanism for finding out about the information seeking behavior of Catholic clergy. The methodology is appropriate and doable.

We can report that the Catholic priests we have interviewed are active pursuers and consumers of information; that their most often used print resources are personal ones; that they rely heavily upon the back-fence college, the invisible college, and the Internet; and that during pilot testing and during the conduct of the interviews with respondents only one clergy person has mentioned the word *library* in a single response to our 13-item, mostly open-ended, interview schedule. The single mention was by one clergyman, not a parish priest but an order priest, who had taken a vow of poverty, and who, therefore, had neither the funds nor the permission to amass personal information resources such as books and periodical subscriptions.

So What?

In some circles, inhabited mostly by persons holding similar beliefs and degrees, librarians have obtained a limited amount of notice and mileage by intoning the suggestion that information is power. Then they compose and complete the faulty syllogism: *Libraries have information. Therefore, libraries have power.*

What some librarians may be overlooking is that fact that in all our communities there are voracious consumers of information who make no connection between information and libraries. Perhaps those librarians might consider reworking the slogan.

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Good information in the hands of resourceful people can be a source of power. Then those librarians could consider ways to address the information needs of clients who, for one reason or another, though they need, get, and employ information daily, do not seem to know or care that librarians can help them sort through and evaluate vast quantities of available information on matters of import to them.

For years special librarians in corporate, industrial, and governmental settings have led the way with aggressive information provision to clients. They have established user profiles, combed the Internet and other sources for information that matches the profiles, retrieved it, and provided it to clients *in advance of their asking for it*. Perhaps public and seminary librarians could engage in similar aggressive behaviors. Making friends among the clergy is a good idea. Few have as much influence over as many people as do the clergy.

Seminary instructors, public and seminary librarians, and the clergy, themselves, may benefit from findings which suggest how clergy go about gathering information for decision-making in connection with their varied responsibilities. These findings could influence how and what teachers teach, especially in courses designed to prepare seminarians for parish practice. It would be good for seminarians to be informed about, and their professors to be reminded about, the kinds of everyday decision responsibilities and opportunities that await the ordained Catholic priest. Seminary librarians who become aware of the information components attached to clergy decision activity can aim their information literacy services in direct congruence with efforts to prepare clergy for practice. They can obtain help in directing such services through access to studies like this one and through consultation with professors during orchestrated planning sessions

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about course content and course assignments. This could have the additional effect of informing clergy-to-be about the support that information agencies could provide them in their ministerial practice.

Some Suggestions for Further Study and Action

While some aspects of the information seeking behaviors of clergy in general, and of Catholic priests in particular, may require additional study, we assert that some evidence is clearly currently available. The researchers whom we cite in this paper demonstrate, and our own study reinforces, two verifiable findings:

1. Clergy are avid consumers of information; and
2. Clergy seldom identify libraries as providers of useful information.

Should librarians consider these findings troublesome and disappointing?

However thoroughly integrated seminary library programs may be with the academic pursuits of seminarians, it appears that subsequent to ordination clergy no longer make connections between libraries and the information they require to carry out their responsibilities. Why is it that the seminarians who once confidently consulted the resources of the seminary library when they needed to research the motivation for Martin Luther's nailing of his theses on the door of All Saints' church in Wittenberg in 1517 eventually conclude that the information place no longer can supply the information required for the conduct of their ministry? Could it be that they have reached the conclusion that *ministerial life is not a term paper*. Our project demonstrates to us that while ministerial life may not be a term paper, it most definitely consists of numerous opportunities to make a variety of decisions for which copious amounts of information are available at public and seminary libraries. Clergy make decisions every day about

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business, family issues, education, architecture, plumbing, transportation, music, preaching, hiring and firing, health and sickness, life and death, and the paths to happiness and salvation. They seek and use information in connection with these decisions. Our research clearly shows this.

We suggest the following action plan. Armed with the information about the kinds of decisions clergy make and the kinds of information that would help them make those decisions, public and seminary librarians should meet and plan a joint response to the predicted information needs. That response could include inviting local clergy or their representatives to a demonstration of the agencies' capacities for addressing known needs. That demonstration could include an opportunity for librarians to employ some of the fact-finding items appended to this document and for clergy to report additional decision responsibilities. Librarians who bring to such a session tangible evidence of the information agencies' capacities to provide exactly the kinds of information support that clergy would find useful may find themselves with a brand new customer base composed of some of the most influential community representatives.

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Biographical Statement

Charles C. Curran holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Duquesne University, the MLS and PhD from Rutgers, and is a Master's degree candidate in theatre from the University of South Carolina, where he is adjunct faculty at the School of Library and Information Science. He has also served in the U. S. Army's ceremonial Third Infantry, as a high school basketball coach, and as a librarian in school, public, and academic libraries. He has authored numerous articles on library administration, collection development, and information services; his most recent book is Guide to Library and Information Agency Management, co-authored with Lewis Miller.

Kayla Burns received her Bachelor of Arts in English and History from Michigan State University in 2010. While at Michigan State she worked in the Turfgrass Information Center, a division of the MSU Libraries, where she wrote abstracts on turfgrass literature and created online archives of several turfgrass publications. She is currently pursuing her MLIS at the University of South Carolina where she is employed as a graduate assistant. She is interested in digital archives, which she has studied as an intern at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Gardens.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to respond to statements and questions intended to help with a study of religion and information. No names of persons, parishes, churches, congregations, or organizations will be reported in this study. I assure you of your complete anonymity. The findings, which I believe will be of interest to clergy and to instructors in seminaries, will be reported at a conference on religion and information in May, 2011, at Kent State University, and I will also seek publication in a religious journal. You are free to decline to answer any or all of these items and to terminate this interview, which should take 30 minutes, at any time. I shall secure all responses in a locked location, and the only persons who will have access to the data, such as consultants at the University's statistics laboratory, will be bound by the regulations governing confidentiality, privacy, and the rights of human subjects. I am available at 803 359 0081 or at chuckc@sc.edu should you have any questions. If you understand and agree to these provisions which I have just read to you, will you please sign this form. The form will be kept separate from your responses and is intended only to verify your informed consent. It will not be linked in any way to your responses.

Signature

Date

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Appendix B

Beginning Time: _____
Ending Time: _____

Respondent Number # _____

Occupational Title (Not “Father” or “Rev” but official occupation in this church, like “Pastor”):

Length of service in this position:

Total previous years experience as an ordained clergyman:

Educational degrees w/dates starting with the most recent:

Additional formal college studies:

Staff size (Other clergy only, including self):

- 1.) In your ministry, which of the following activities do you regard as your primary responsibility? On a scale of 1-7, **with 7 indicating your most primary responsibility**, please rank these activities in order of importance. Use “NA” to indicate a responsibility you do not have.

Preaching _____
Teaching _____
Care giving _____
Administering _____
Conducting Service/Liturgy _____
Counseling _____
Reflecting/Engaging in Personal Self Development _____

- 2.) Which of the following activities do you spend the most time preparing for and executing? Please rank them, with **7 indicating the most time consuming**. Use “NA” to indicate a responsibility you do not have.

Preaching _____
Teaching _____
Care giving _____
Administering _____
Conducting Service/Liturgy _____
Counseling _____
Reflecting/Engaging in Personal Development _____

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- 3.) In the conduct of your priestly duties what decisions have you contemplated making in the last month or so? For example, starting a building project or advising a parishioner: (label a, b, c, etc.)
- 4.) Can you tell us about a major decision you may have contemplated previous to the last month? (label a, b, c, etc.)
- 5.) What or whom did you consult in connection with these decisions in order to get information? (Seek order of sources, label a, b, c, etc.)

(Ask in the order ranked in question 1, beginning with “7”)

- 6.) In the conduct of your ministry what information sources do you use to gain information for the following activities:

Preaching
Teaching
Care giving
Administrating
Conducting Service/Liturgy
Counseling
Reflection and Personal Development

- 7.) Consider your work week to be a pie comprised of two slices. One slice represents executing all of your responsibilities and the other the gathering of information to execute these responsibilities. What percentage would you assign each slice?

Performing Responsibilities _____
Information Gathering _____

- 8.) Of all of your responsibilities, what is the most time consuming with regard to information gathering? Please Explain.
- 9.) In the process of making decisions, if you encounter different viewpoints, either in information or from people, how do you evaluate these different viewpoints?
- 10.) When or why do you stop searching for information?
- 11.) Do you rely on others to do some or all of your searching?
- 12.) If your answer was “yes,” then whom?
- 13.) When, in your priestly duties, do you consult computer, print, audiovisual, or institutional sources for information?