A Methodology for Studying the Information Seeking

Behaviors of Catholic Clergy

Charles C. Curran

Kayla Burns

School of Library and Information Science

University of South Carolina

Author Note

Charles C. Curran is Adjunct Distinguished Professor Emeritus at SLIS and master's degree candidate in the Department of Theatre and Dance, USC.

Kayla Burns is a graduate of Michigan State University and Master's degree Candidate at the School of Library and Information Science, USC.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Charles C. Curran, School of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208. Contact: chuckc@sc.edu

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. None has mentioned the use of a library in the process of information gathering.

A Methodology for Studying the Information Seeking

Behavior of Catholic Clergy

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 and the files of friends and neighbors before considering possibilities at formal information agencies. Only if their own retrieval efforts at the agencies fail, do they consult a librarian. 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.

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

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

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 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.

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.

Findings

Our study is in progress, so findings are at this time preliminary. 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.

At this time we are prepared to say that Catholic priests 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 no clergy person has mentioned the word *library* in a single response to our 13-item, mostly open-ended, interview schedule—not during pilot testing and not during the conduct of the interviews with respondents.

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.

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 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.

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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

Appendix B

Beginning Time: _____   Respondent Number # _____
Ending Time: _____

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   _____

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?