Relying upon the Sangha as Information Practice: An example from Facebook

INTRODUCTION

The limited, but growing Library and Information Science (LIS) research investigating religious information behaviours and practices (notably: Porcella, 1973; Allen, 1987; Phillips, 1992; Tanner, 1994; Wicks, 1999; Kari, 2001; Roland, 2007; Lambert, 2010; Michels, 2011; Michels, 2012; Saleh & Sadiq, 2012 and Saleh & Abu Bakar, 2013) has focused nearly exclusively on examples and contexts from Western religious traditions, with the majority of them exploring Christian ones. At present, there are no studies examining Eastern religious contexts, in particular Buddhism. This existing research is further limited in that it is largely conducted within the scope of work-related information practices where their informants, clergy people, are conceptualized as professionals performing a work role and engaging in work tasks. Indeed, even Saleh & Sadiq (2012) and Saleh & Abu Bakar (2013) utilize Leckie, Pettigrew, & Sylvain’s (1996) model of professional information behaviour to explain the behaviours of their informants. What is lacking, as Michels (2012) has noted, are studies of religious everyday life information seeking behaviours or, in other words,
studies of information needs, seeking and use in regards to daily religious concerns. According to the Pew Research Center’s (2012) study of the global religious landscape, 84 percent of the world’s population professes a religious affiliation. Given the aforementioned statistics on global religiosity, it is surprising that the focus of the studies of religious information behaviours has been on religious workers rather than on the numerous everyday adherents of the world’s varied religious traditions.

This study that I have conducted for the sake of participation at the 2015 conference on Information and Religion at Kent State University can be contextualized within my doctoral research that will begin to fill these gaps in the research that I noted above. Given the conference’s theme on technology and community, I have decided to investigate how technology and community can equally play a part in filling the gap that I have outlined. By studying technological aspects of religious phenomena in particular and the activities taking place “within it,” the informational nature of religious phenomena and practices are revealed, especially within the Internet with its preponderance of textual and visual media. Floridi (2010) furthers this by suggesting that information communication technologies bring to light the “intrinsically informational nature of human agents” (p. 10). Thus, to better understand religious information practices and the communities that engage in them, technology and specifically the Internet, is an easily accessible platform from which to develop such an understanding.

This study that I have conducted seeks to examine online information practices of a community of Buddhists within the context of a Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) group, bringing together my burgeoning research in Buddhist information behaviours with the theme of the conference: technology and community. A
primary assumption, or working theory that permeates my research is that religious practices can be understood informationally, as information practices, or as containing information practices, at least within a Buddhist context. In particular, for this study, I suggest that the Buddhist practice of relying upon the Sangha, or going for refuge to the Sangha is primarily an information practice. Savolainen (2008) defines an information practice as “a set of socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources” (p. 2). I am tied to Savolainen’s definition of information practices only tenuously, given the existing conceptual muddiness between information behaviours and information practices (for more detailed discussion on this issue see Savolainen, 2008 or Case, 2012) and my own struggle to conceptualize my own work within either “camp”. However, I believe that Savolainen’s definition is fairly flexible, allowing for my interpretation of religious practices as information practices to be acceptable.

UNDERSTANDING SOME BUDDHIST CONCEPTS

Before delving into the study, it may be helpful to those not familiar with Buddhism to understand some of the concepts that I will be discussing. The most fundamental activity of a Buddhist is going for refuge to the Three Jewels. A Buddhist is defined by this refuge; one can call themselves a Buddhist if they continue to go for refuge to the Three Jewels. The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. They are called “jewels” because they are understood to be as precious like one might consider as a material jewel that provides benefit to the possessor. The first Jewel is the Buddha, the originator of the teachings who engaged in a spiritual path that
lead to Enlightenment, a perfected state of mind that is completely free from suffering and pain and that naturally seeks to benefit others. The second Jewel is the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, which is essentially technical instructions and advice so that other sentient beings to attain the same state as Buddha. ‘Dharma’ within the context of Buddhism means ‘protection,’ so by putting the Dharma into practice, understanding it as Buddha’s personal advice to improve the mind and positive qualities, it functions to protect us from suffering and lead beings to happiness. Within the context of this study, I consider the written scriptures and the oral teachings of Dharma to be information. The third Jewel, the Sangha, has several interpretations. Technically, true Sangha Jewels are beings that have attained a certain (high) level of realization of Dharma by putting it into practice. In early Buddhism, the Sangha referred only to the Buddha’s ordained disciples. However, over the centuries, the Sangha has evolved to be understood as the “Fourfold Assembly” which is the assembly of all Buddhist practitioners (lay men and women, ordained men and women). Often, local Buddhist communities are called “Sanghas”. It is this last definition of Sangha that I will be employing within this study. One engages in the practice of “going for refuge” to the Three Jewels by developing fear and faith. That is, one develops a virtuous fear, comprehending their real situation within the Buddhist interpretation of reality that is presently causing them suffering, and then develops faith in the Three Jewels recognizing that only by taking refuge in them, like one might go for refuge to police when in danger, that an individual can be freed from all suffering permanently.

As previously mentioned, I am suggesting that the Buddhist practice of relying upon the Sangha, or going for refuge to the Sangha is primarily an information practice.
Sangha members engage in information practices to support each other, or gain support for oneself on a Buddhist spiritual path. Understanding going for refuge informationally, Harris & Dewdney’s (1994) observations of battered women and their information resources rings with similarity. They write, “this information-giving function is conceptually difficult to separate from the help-giving function” (p. 35-6) which equally characterizes Sangha relying upon their peers for information; there is a union of information-giving and help-providing functions.

Traditionally, local Sanghas convened in their monasteries, local temples and Dharma centres and performed their information-giving. This traditional form of reliance still exists however, with the advent of information communication technologies and especially the Internet, individuals could go for refuge or rely or rely upon their Sangha companions with the aid of technology. These new technologies provided “new forums and new tools for the public advocacy of faith and for participation in public acts of ritual communication” (O’Leary, 2004, p. 37). The term ‘cybersangha’ was coined by Ray in 1991 as a term to describe online Buddhist communities which had arisen on email discussion forums and Buddhist databases which served as the first cybersanghas (Prebish, 2004). Today, Ray’s conception of the cybersangha can be considered to have intensified with the advent of the so-called “Web 2.0” technologies that heavily incorporate social aspects into the fabric of the Web and Internet as well as the rise of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter where cybersanghas exist.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**
I have chosen to investigate the information practices that constitute going for refuge to the Sangha within an online Buddhist community. The particular cybersangha that I have chosen to investigate is a Facebook group entitled “Students and Followers of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso” (available at: https://www.facebook.com/groups/45433823612/). The group is publicly available functions with their stated purpose “to discuss the meaning of [Gyatso’s] teachings and how we apply them to our daily life” (from the group’s description). Geshe Kelsang Gyatso is the spiritual guide of the New Kadampa Tradition but the group is not directly affiliated or connected with the New Kadampa Tradition. The Facebook group, as of June 1, 2015 consisted of 3688 members.

Since I have already established as my working assumption that the practice of relying upon the Sangha is an information practice, the research question that lead my actual study sought to explore this in more detail. My research question was: “What information practices characterize relying upon the Sangha?” In order to investigate this properly, I engaged in a qualitative content analysis of the contents of the postings and comments within aforementioned Facebook group.

Data collection consisted of copying and pasting from Facebook into a word processing document each post that was newly posted between September 1 and September 30, 2014. I arbitrarily decided to make September the beginning of the sample frame (it was four months previous to when I began data collection in January 2015—it seemed far enough removed that it would not likely change or be commented on further as I collected the data). I originally had planned to collect four months worth of data, but quickly decided on a month once I realized that a month would be
adequate. Data collection occurred on January 9, 2015 and April 2, 3, and 4, 2015. The gap in the collection was due to a busy winter semester at the University of Western Ontario. During the sample frame, I collected 117 posts, which averaged to 3 to 4 posts a day.

Data analysis consisted of a repeated reading method through which themes or categories were inductively created (Mayring, 2000). I did not include factors such as number of ‘shares’ or ‘likes’ into the analysis, but merely focussed on the textual and visual content of the posts themselves. For the sake of full disclosure, I have been a pre-existing member of this Facebook group for at least two years prior to my undertaking of this study. I have posted twice outside of the sample frame, but have commented on a very few number posts within the sample frame. However, I do not believe that this negatively affects my study because I was not engaged in the study at the times the posts and comments were made my original postings were done in a spirit of earnestness.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Two primary themes emerged as a result of the qualitative content analysis into the information practices that characterized reliance on the Sangha. These two themes were (1) Informing others and (2) Asking others with each subdivided into more exact subthemes. The posts and their comments were considered separately during the analysis. In reporting the results of the study, results in regards to the comments will follow results related to the posts.
The first theme, Informing others was characterized by sharing information or information resources in a variety of media. This theme was subdivided into:

- **Buddhist teachings and commentary.** These tended to be extended articles about topics in Buddhist philosophy or cosmology, often hosted externally to the Facebook group on blogs. A notable example is below:
• **Quotation from scripture.** Related to the Buddhist teachings category above, some posters tended to share a single line, verse or stanza from a work. These did not include an explanation of the meaning of the verse, like in the category above. An example is below:
• **Images.** Images were also often shared of Buddhas, of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso or of other practitioners. As the example above demonstrates, these were sometimes coupled with textual information sharing such as quotation from scripture.

• **Articles.** External articles were often linked to as original posts to the Facebook group. These often were not *directly* concerning Geshe Kelsang Gyatso’s teachings or the New Kadampa Tradition, but only tangentially related such as the article from dorjeshugden.com in the example below. Dorje Shugden is a Buddha venerated within the New Kadampa Tradition.
While the above sub-categories could be described as resembling more closely to “traditional” information sources coming from those possessing some sort of cognitive authority, the following categories are decidedly less formal, but can still be considered information or information resources because of their informing capabilities.

- **Video.** A single video was posted during this sample frame linking to an external website that hosted a Buddhist-related song about one of the New Kadampa Tradition’s lineage masters.

- **Poems, anecdotes and open contemplations.** A few Buddhist poems were written and posted in different threads by the same author. Some posters related their unique personal experiences of practicing the Dharma as an anecdote while others posted a form of open contemplation which resembles the quotation from scripture category above, but was decidedly less formalized as it often included their own personal experiences or opinions on the subject. They did not directly ask a question to be answered (which would place it in Theme 2).

  The second theme was Asking others which was also subdivided into a variety of sub-categories and was primarily categorized by posts which requested information, broadly understood, or information resources from other members of the group. This theme was subdivided into:
• **Clarification on philosophy.** These posts asked questions about difficult to understand aspects of Buddhist philosophy that are not explicitly covered in Geshe Kelsang Gyatso’s works. Two examples are below:

![Facebook post 1](image1)

![Facebook post 2](image2)

• **Questions in regards to practice.** Related to the previous sub-category of clarification on points of Buddhist philosophy, some posts could be grouped together that asked questions specifically about Buddhist practice, rather than merely philosophy. These posts were more geared to the poster taking some action after receiving a response. An example follows:
• **Asking for guidance in a difficult situation.** These posts also asked for information that was action-orientated, but these were qualitatively different in that there was a sense of urgency to their being resolved or that there was a perceived greater emotional involvement in receiving a response. An example follows:
- **Invitation for contemplation.** This sub-category is related to the first, clarification on philosophy, but these posts are decidedly longer and more substantial and do not ask a short, specific question, but are rather more open-ended, sometimes asking a series of questions and could be considered more an open contemplation as there may be many aspects of the post that could be commented upon. For example:

![Facebook post example]

- **Requests for Fall Festival accommodation.** Three festivals are held every year within the New Kadampa Tradition. The Spring and Summer Festivals are held in the United Kingdom at the ‘mother centre’ of the New Kadampa Tradition while the Fall Festival moves from place to place around the world. In 2014, the Fall Festival was held in Glen Spey, New York in mid-October. Some of the posters were utilizing the Facebook group as a way to garner information about accommodation. For example:
- **Questions regarding NKT study programs, centre administration.** While the explicit purpose of the Facebook group is to discuss Geshe Kelsang Gyatso’s teachings, sometimes there are posts made requesting information about the New Kadampa Tradition’s study programs, as well as some information, guidance or advice on running a New Kadampa Tradition centre. An example follows:

- **Requests for specific resources.** Lastly, some posters requested certain “known-item” information resources from the other group members.

The final results to report are those deriving from the content analysis of the comments that were posted to the threads started within the sample frame. While these
comments were most often ‘informing’ in nature, rather than ‘asking’ as will be demonstrated below, questions often followed in the comments of post that asked a question such as those that moved the discussion forward, or those of a related but different matter. The comments often evolved into a dialogue or discussion on the topic at hand, offering different perspectives on an issue. Sometimes the original poster provided some further clarification to their original question while others often provided similar or exact answers as other people, suggesting perhaps that they did not read other people’s comments in the same thread. In addition to these general characteristics, there were a few other distinct themes present in the comments. There were:

- **Explication from Gyatso’s works / oral teachings.** Commenters often quoted verbatim from Gyatso’s works or oral teachings that they had attended in the past.

- **Explication from other senior teachers within the tradition.** In a similar vein, commenters often quoted or paraphrased senior teachers or their own resident teachers within the tradition.

- **Explication from NKT’s Internal Rules.** In matters of conduct or centre administration, the Internal rules were used as an information resource.

- **Explication from own knowledge/experience.** When not deferring to a cognitive authority on an issue, members of the group often provided information in the form of their own experiences on the topic at hand. These responses often began with: “I think...”; “I believe...”; “I reckon...”; “My feeling is...”; “I would say...”

- **Providing a requested resource.** Resources requested often were responded to as a link or as an image placed within a comment field within the thread.
• **Suggesting others to take action or practice.** These responses included: “Just do it” or “Ask your teacher”

• **Exclamations of support/affirmation/gratitude.** These included “Yes”; “Thank you”; “Wonderful”; “Pure,” “Beautiful”; “I rejoice”.

In my opinion, what these posts and comments demonstrate is that there is an exchange of information happening within this online Buddhist community. While it is impossible to exactly determine group members’ states of mind from merely analyzing words on a screen, one can perhaps infer from some of the more pleasant or grateful comments that individuals are deriving some sort of benefit from their interactions in this Facebook group and that they are indeed finding refuge in their cybersangha. The aggregate of these information practices suggest that these cybersanghas constitute a information-based community of practice as per Case’s (2012) definition. He writes that communities of practice “share some kind of work or interest, and thus knowledge. They share information and thus learn from one another, forming meanings and identity” (p. 137). The shared interest is Buddha’s teachings, or in the case of this Facebook group, Geshe Kelsang Gyatso’s presentation of Buddha’s teachings. Because of their interest, they share information and information resources with each other, learning new things about the Dharma and how to practice it. From a content analysis, it is difficult to ascertain whether group members are forming meanings and identities from their participation in the group, this would beneficial to explore in future research.
SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is my hope with my doctoral research, and of course this small study, to problematize the ‘ordinary’ or ‘mundane’ nature of our common conceptualizations of information by examining them within religious contexts. Religious contexts and their frequent goal of transcendence force us to look beyond our immediate context to different modes of possible existence, and thus to different ways of understanding information as well as the mind that is the object that does the informing and is the object that is informed. As a corollary to this, a question I am exploring in my doctoral research in general is whether religious information behaviours and practices can veritably be a part of our current conceptualizations of everyday life, or if they are better conceived of as something else. In 2010, Clemens & Cushing studied the information behaviours of adopted individuals looking for their birthmothers and individuals conceived by sperm donors searching for their fathers and found that, although these information-seeking situations might be considered within the realm of “everyday” since they do not concern work-related information behaviours, they are rather far more extraordinary and suggest that these information behaviours are “beyond everyday life”. I suggest a similar notion with regards to religious information seeking behaviours. While searching for religious information in the Bible or a Buddhist sutra, receiving oral instructions at a religious service or utilizing religious information by engaging in prayer can easily be considered a part of some people’s everyday life information experiences, the goal of religious practice is to move beyond ordinary life, to transcend it. In a way, these aforementioned information practices—and especially the relying upon the
Sangha as I suggested in this study, can be considered beyond everyday life information practices as well.

Taking religious information behaviours and practices as its own unique category as I have alluded to by calling them potentially “beyond everyday life,” we can also begin to examine where else existing information behaviour research meshes with existing research into the sociology of religion, psychology of religion and religious studies. In regards to information needs for example, would better understanding religious motivation help us to better understand the information needs of religious individuals? Also, in regards to the poorly-studied realm of information use, can we understand the development of Buddhist realizations within this realm—of putting information into practice?

In conclusion, this study suggested that the Buddhist practice of relying upon the Sangha is an information practice. Within the context of a Facebook group the author attempted to characterize, through a qualitative content analysis of the posts of “Students and Followers of Geshe Kelsang Gyatso” (understood to be a cybersangha), this reliance. The two primary themes that emerged from this analysis were ‘Informing others,’ which essentially involved the posters offering information and ‘Asking others’ which essentially involved posters asking for information. The responses to these posts were also analyzed and what was demonstrated was an exchange of information for the participating group members’ benefit. Considered together, all of the information practices that constitute relying upon the Sangha transform this Facebook group from a mere cybersangha to an information-based community of practice where the members
are engaged in providing help to each other by proffering information and learning from one another.
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