

# Project Oneness World: Knowledge sharing through the Life Journeys of Information Scientists

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## ABSTRACT

A good way to understand the information science (IS) and knowledge management (KM) fields is to study the lives of people with a significant impact on that field. In 2018, the first author started a project (<http://www.projectonenessworld.com>) to conduct interviews / oral histories of people from all walks of life. The purpose of the initiative is to gather human stories through interviews to inspire other human stories. The initial focus was on in-person interviews, and interviews of four information science leaders – Professors Eileen Abels, Laila Marouf, Michele Cloonan, and Toni Carbo were conducted, where Professor Laila Marouf spoke about her KM research. In December 2020, the project received internal funding to carry out more interviews of information scientists to understand the turns and serendipity into their life journeys. The study protocol was approved by the Simmons University IRB. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews will primarily be virtual, and face-to-face when permitted. This will have the advantage of easier access, faster editing time, but may lack the easy camaraderie and high quality of face-to-face interviews. The purpose of this poster is to share the progress on the project, including video snippets of the interviews conducted, and its future directions and elicit feedback and participation from the audience. The interviews should, in turn, inspire people to progress further in their own life journeys, and in their research and professional IS and KM journeys. The study will contribute to research in KM and knowledge sharing.

## KEYWORDS

Turns, serendipity, biographical research, information scientists, knowledge sharing.

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding a research field often requires years of training through reading articles, reviewing manuscripts, gathering and analyzing data, and publishing one's work. Published articles are polished and do not often convey the reality and messiness of the research process, creating a barrier to entry for many students and those outside the field. A good way to understand a professional field is to study the life of a person who has made or is making a significant impact on that field. Information science (IS) research bridges the intersections between people, information, and technology. People or person, are central here. Brenda Dervin calls the person a “body-mind-heart-spirit moving through time and space, with a past history, present reality and future dreams or ambitions.” (Foreman-Wernet, 2003, p.7, Agarwal 2012).

Knowledge Management (KM), on the other hand, is where the place is central – the institution, organization, company, library, archive, etc. What is termed as information seeking in information behavior can be understood as knowledge sharing in KM. KM is concerned with ‘activities related to capturing, utilizing, creating, transferring, and storing of organizational knowledge’ (Jasimuddin, 2005, p. 39) in order to fulfil organizational objectives. Knowledge creation/capture, knowledge sharing/transfer, and knowledge application/use are important processes of the KM cycle (Agarwal & Islam, 2014). Of these, knowledge sharing is among the most central or KM processes and the reasons why KM is often implemented in organizations.

Figure 1 shows the research space of information behavior demonstrating the cycle from the person/actor/user (and their information need) to their process of information seeking/searching from one of more sources, including encountering information by serendipity, avoiding or making sense of that information. The same phenomenon can also be seen from the lens of the knowledge management processes described in the above paragraph.

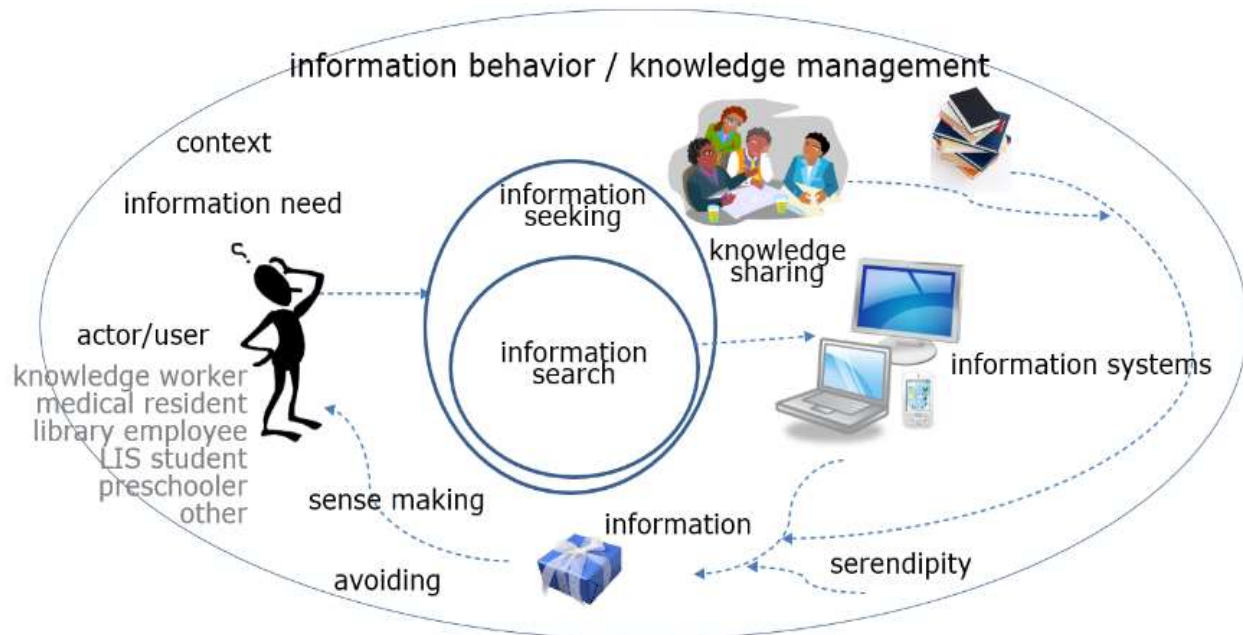


Figure 1 The research space of information behavior and knowledge management

The biographical research method is a specific type of qualitative research “which uses stories of individuals and other ‘personal materials’ to understand the individual life within its social context” (Roberts, 2002, p.3). The method is useful from an academic lens to gain insight not just into the person, but their work and how it relates to the information science field as a whole. The Association for Information Science & Technology and the Medical Library Association conduct oral histories on significant contributors to the IS field. Informal biographical research also takes place at certain courses in universities e.g., in the Theories of Information Science and Oral History courses at Simmons University. However, many of these interviews are not easily accessible to students, new researchers, and the general public, contributing towards making the information science field the domain of a select few, rather than more widely known across the world.

In the 2020 ASIS&T SIG USE Symposium, Jenna Hartel made a presentation on the major turns in the IS field based on her paper “Turn turn turn” (Hartel, 2019) - the cognitive turn, the affective turn, the neo-documentary turn, the socio-cognitive turn, the everyday life turn, the social constructionist turn, and the embodied turn. The research questions investigated in this project are:

- 1) What are the major turns in the life of an IS professional?
- 2) How has the IS person’s research journey reflected one of Hartel’s turns?
- 3) What is the role of serendipity (Agarwal, 2015) and other contextual factors (Agarwal, 2018) in the turns of the IS professional’s life and research journey?

## THE PROJECT

The audience can view past interviews on the Project Oneness World website (<http://www.projectonenessworld.com>). See Figure 2. In the continuation of this project, the first author will conduct comprehensive biographical research of a person in the IS field. Specifically, individuals who have made a significant impact in the field will be identified. The focus will be to understand the person’s life journey to identify the major turns leading to a professional career and scholarly achievements, career paths and deviations, research trajectories, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on them, and their perspective of information science. To make the interviews accessible, they would continue to be put up on the Project Oneness World website, and also shared through social media channels - YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The second author is involved with the editing process of the videos. Optionally, they would also be transcribed, and closed-captioned in other languages, depending on resources. Findings across multiple interviews addressing the research questions will be shared through conferences and journals.



Figure 2 A still from an interview with Dean Emerita and Professor Michele Cloonan in August 2018  
([www.projectonenessworld.com](http://www.projectonenessworld.com))

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Studying the life of an IS person will help researchers and students study their journey and work, and also inspire one's own journey within this field. For students, biographical research will increase awareness of entry points into the field, deepen their understanding of how to be professionally active and engaged, and broaden their horizons for potential career options. For those interested in information science, regardless of their level of experience, biographies of particular individuals will serve as experiential gateways into the field. Making the biographies public through the Project Oneness World website and social media channels will help make the IS field more accessible to the general public, and inspire more people to join the profession. This is especially pertinent when people are increasingly vulnerable to disinformation and fake news. The critical thinking and information literacy training that IS professionals have can help make people better consumers of information (Agarwal & Alsaeedi, 2020). By utilizing knowledge sharing as a central outcome of the project, the study will contribute to research in knowledge sharing and knowledge management.

As many of the information professionals are likely to be faculty, students will be more aware of faculty work. Also, faculty in other departments, colleges, and universities will get aware of what their peers are doing. This would facilitate increased collaboration. Also, in each interview, the future goals of the person interviewed will be identified. Students and others watching the videos can help the person move towards the goals. Students and other researchers wanting to work with the IS person based on the interviews could further the establishment of mentee-mentor relationships.

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