

Information Practices of Ethno-Cultural Communities (IPEC)

Nadia Caidi
Associate Professor
Faculty of Information Studies
University of Toronto
416 978 4664; fax: 416 971 399
nadia.caidi@utoronto.ca

Research Assistant:
Danielle Allard, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Information Studies

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Overview of Research

Government agencies as well as various immigrant serving agencies, local community and ethno-cultural organizations, and information and cultural institutions all provide settlement-related information to immigrants throughout the immigration process (i.e. before, during, and after arrival to Canada) through a number of channels, including: print, in-person and online. Despite the vast array of resources and services available to them, there is little research that examines the extent to which newcomers are able to adequately access and make use of government, settlement, and ethno-cultural information and services available to them. Relatively little research exists about the ways in which newcomers and longer established immigrants locate and access content in forms that are understandable and usable to them. Understanding immigrants' information practices –their needs, the barriers they face, and the ways in which they access and absorb information- is crucial to our capacity to successfully provide settlement-related information to immigrants.

The purpose of this study was to examine the information needs, uses and seeking behaviour of people who have newly immigrated to Canada (five years or less). "Information practices" is a well known concept within Information Studies that suggests that individuals locate and use information in complex ways to address a variety of "information needs". We conducted an extensive literature review to identify issues around information production, organization, dissemination, access and use by new immigrants. In addition to the literature synthesis, we also designed instruments to conduct a large scale empirical study of information practices of immigrants from three ethno-cultural communities (Chinese, Indians, and Iranians)¹. The instruments include a questionnaire survey using a Social Network Analysis approach and an interview guide, which were both pilot tested. These instruments will be used in the dissertation research of Ph.D. candidate Danielle Allard (at the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto). The full-scale empirical study that we intended for this phase of the project could not be completed primarily because of the time it took us to conduct the literature review, to design and test the instruments, and our ambitious sample size. We also underestimated the difficulties in recruiting respondents. On the upside, we used the time to establish strong connections with various community partners, which will make future data collection much easier.

¹ Chinese and Indians were selected because they topped the 2001 and 2006 Census' list of countries of birth of individuals who immigrated to Canada. Iranians were selected to enable a comparison with a group that has a different set of cultural attitudes and values.

While our intended objectives of collecting data for the study were not fully met, we were able to make significant progress in our understanding of the complex issues around immigrants' information practices. Based on issues arising from the literature review, we also decided to focus on two sub-projects, which resulted in two full-length articles (both forthcoming). The first one revolved around the issue of spatial mismatch in information provision, with a focus on one particular information institution, the public library. Our aim was to understand how public libraries fit within the lived experience of two immigrant communities in Toronto: Chinese and Indians. Using Geographical Information System (GIS) software, we mapped various key indicators such as the areas of residence of immigrants from the two communities studied; the poverty lines for the neighborhoods selected; and the service provision of the public library systems in catchment areas of six public library systems located near immigrant communities in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area. The purpose was to assess the ways in which libraries have accounted (or not) for changing patterns of migration and settlement over time, and how poverty and access to information resources relate to one another and to the integration of new immigrants into Canadian society².

The other study explores the relationship between one's information practices and the sense of belonging into a society, especially in times of crisis. We examined one particular community, individuals of Arab origins and/or of Muslim faith, in a post 9/11 world. We examined how the post 9/11 climate has impacted their use of various information sources, and how their information practices mediate their experience and sense of belonging in Canadian society³. A survey was conducted with 120 participants, and supplemented by in-depth interviews. A 15-page questionnaire was developed and administered to the 120 participants. There were five main sections to the questionnaire: demographics, information sources, experience with computers and the Internet, and perspectives on the events of 9/11. The questionnaire consisted of both open-ended and closed questions. The closed questions were a mixture of Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions. Participants were paid a small honorarium of \$10 as a token of appreciation for their time. Among those who answered the questionnaire, a subset of participants (N=16) was asked to participate in a 20-minute interview. They were asked various

² A manuscript has been prepared and is currently under review (we will submit an unabridged version of it for the CERIS Working Paper Series as well).

³ An article stemming from this study will appear in the journal *Government Information Quarterly*. A shorter version has been submitted to the CERIS Policy Matters Series.

open-ended questions. The questions addressed broad issues, asking participants what it meant for them to be a Muslim, what they saw as the most significant issues in their personal and professional lives since 9/11, their reflections and assessment on their access to information and other rights in a post 9/11 world, and for their input in reaching out to non-Muslims. We decided to limit our sample to Muslim students rather than surveying the general Muslim population in Toronto to ensure a more homogeneous (and comparable) sample. The population therefore consisted of self-identified Muslim students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in Toronto. 80% of the participants were born in countries other than Canada, and on average, respondents have lived in Toronto for approximately 9 years. The findings highlight this group's sophistication with regard to accessing and using various information sources; their heavy consumption of news media coupled with a deep mistrust vis a vis the media apparatus, which they perceive to be biased; the importance they give to critical thinking and information literacy skills; their shifting perceptions vis a vis their information rights; as well as a call for increased introspection within the Muslim community(ies).

Together, the literature review, the instruments designed, and the two studies outlined above fill a gap in our understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding the information practices of various ethno-cultural communities. Moreover, the funding by CERIS/SSHRC provided the foundation for a dissertation thesis research by Danielle Allard, who worked as a Research Assistant on this project. We were also able to initiate and nurture a fruitful collaboration with various community partners. As such, the funding was well leveraged to provide training experience as well as a framework for other important research and collaborative opportunities.

Key Findings and Policy Implications

A substantial amount of time was spent on undertaking a thorough literature review of immigrants' information practices. We used the everyday life information seeking (ELIS) theories as well as the concept of information poverty to address the significance of context in individuals' search and use of information. Both these concepts address the lack of necessary resources, such as adequate social networks or information finding skills, to describe some recent immigrants' situations. Another useful tool for framing the study is a description of immigrants' information needs in terms of their stages of settlement including pre-migration, immediate, intermediate, and long-term. We believe there is tremendous value in structuring information

practices around these stages of settlement. Our findings point to the heterogeneous nature of the literature on immigrants' information practices. We organized the literature according to several themes: information needs; information sources used by immigrants; and barriers to finding information. The top settlement information needs of new immigrants are language information (including information about training, translation, and interpretation services); pre-migration information; employment information (including job searching skills and special services to foreign trained professionals); housing information; information about making connections in the community (including connections to professional associations, volunteer opportunities, mentoring, and community organizations); and, information about the new culture and orientation to "Canadian life". The top information needs for longer established immigrants include health information; employment information; educational information; political information and current events (especially news about the country of origin); language learning information (including information about ESL programs and materials); information about transportation; information about identity construction (including how to position themselves vis-à-vis Canadian society); and, information about cultural or religious events.

Barriers to accessing information for both newcomers and longer established immigrants include language (including fear of speaking in English); suspicion or mistrust of authority (including government and other institutions); isolation and the sense of being an outsider; using children to find information (who may have poor information finding skills); lack of familiarity with many Canadian information sources; cultural differences; and, not knowing how to ask for services.

In almost every case, family and friends were identified as the number one information source consulted by all immigrants. Media sources, such as the newspaper and the Internet were identified as the second most popular information source. In particular, respondents in many of the studies identified other-language material as preferred. Organizations such as community centres, settlement agencies, and government were also identified as significant information sources for immigrants.

Across the areas examined, we have found evidence of the importance of social networks (both local and transnational) as a means to facilitate the settlement and inclusion process, potentially leading to more employment opportunities and opportunities in other aspects of the immigrant's life. Life-world perspectives are also deemed critical in some aspects of immigrants'

settlement. For instance, in health care, different cultural understandings of health, illness, and treatment can lead to communication problems and immigrants' dissatisfaction with or under utilization of the health care system. In health as in other domains, we found evidence to suggest that redundancy and multiple forms of communication (including the use of one's first language and popular media) may contribute to an improved provision of health information and services.

Information sources identified in the literature include government, other individuals, ISAs and other ethno-cultural associations, "ethnic" media, and the Internet. Technology is one of the main impetuses enabling transnational practices, but in more general terms, technology does not benefit all immigrants; online interfaces and services are found to be difficult for new users to navigate. But more research on cross-cultural usability is needed.

There is an increasing body of literature that discusses these information sources and the role of trust, relationship-building, and we advocate for more research that distinguishes between the instrumental vs. more expressive forms of information seeking. The role played by "gatekeepers" (individuals who are considered to be knowledgeable within communities, and can "monitor" flows of information) has been emphasized over and over. Interestingly, an increasing body of research is examining the use that immigrants are making of transnational network ties to access information.

Among policy recommendations that stem from this study are the fact that social exclusion ought to be treated also as an information problem, and that in order to understand information practices of immigrants and cater to their needs, a holistic approach is advocated that encompasses a closer examination of theories and principles of social inclusion and social capital in addition to information seeking behaviour. Indeed, assessing the contextual and situational factors constituting the information environments that define information practices of immigrants is essential. It is evident from this study that we value various means of providing access to information to immigrants. There is no one size fits all when it comes to fulfilling one's information needs, and as such there needs to be various strategies to inform and empower the individuals who have chosen Canada to immigrate. Improving immigrants' literacy skills should be seen as a complement to providing sound government information, which itself is a complement to the important role of mediators, facilitators and "translators" played by ISAs, ethno-culturally specific agencies, libraries, etc.

In terms of policy recommendations, we advocate for increased knowledge transfer between various actors, including best strategies for information provision and access; more fluidity between research and practice; an assessment of various agencies' own information environment (including the process of producing and disseminating information to immigrants); and giving a voice to immigrants themselves by making it possible for them to be active participants rather than mere recipients in the design of information strategies and tools.

Research Outputs

In addition to the literature review and instruments designed for the empirical study, two full-length manuscripts were produced and submitted for peer-review publication. These are:

- Caidi, N., Allard, D. & Luk, C. (Under Review). "Locating Public Libraries in a Multicultural City: Experiences from Toronto, Canada" (39 pages). *Library Quarterly*.

[An unabridged version of this article will be submitted as a CERIS Working Paper]

- Caidi, N. & MacDonald, S. (Forthcoming). "Information Practices of Canadian Muslims Post 9/11" Accepted for publication in *Government Information Quarterly*. 2008. (35 pages).

[A shorter version of this article will appear in the CERIS Policy Matters Series].

As a follow up to this project, the researchers were contacted by CIC (through Metropolis) for a further exploration of immigrants' information seeking practices.

- Caidi, N., Allard, D. & Dechief, D. (2008). "Information Practices of Immigrants to Canada: A Review of the Literature". Final report submitted to Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Metropolis. March 31, 2008.

Dissemination Activities

We presented the framework for this study as well as related findings at various public and scholarly venues, including:

- "Locating Public Libraries in a Multicultural Society: A Spatial Mismatch?" Poster presented at the Canadian Library Association (CLA), May 24-27, 2007, St John, NF. (With Danielle Allard). [Abstract refereed].
- "The Everyday Information Practices of New Immigrants to Canada: Findings from the IPEC Study." Presentation to the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS) conference. Montreal, May 10-12, 2007. [Abstract refereed].

- "*Locating Public Libraries in a Multicultural Society: A Spatial Mismatch?*" Poster presented at the Ontario Library Association Super Conference, Toronto, January 31-February 3, 2007. [Abstract refereed].
- "*Including Immigrants in Canadian Society: What role do ICTs play?*" (2007). Presentation to the 9th National Metropolis Conference on Immigration and Settlement Issues. Toronto, March 1-4, 2007. (With Danielle Allard). [Abstract refereed].
- "*Information, Globalization and Cultural Diversity.*" United Nations University-Korean National Commission for UNESCO (UNU-KNCU) Global Seminar, Jeju Island, Republic of Korea. July 18-22, 2006. [Invited contribution].
- "*Information Practices of Ethno-Racial Communities.*" Presentation at the Ontario Library Association Super Conference, Toronto, ON, February 3-6, 2005. [Abstract refereed].

Research Collaboration and Training

This project enabled a wide range of collaborative opportunities with students as well as community partners. As an example, a fruitful discussion at a CERIS seminar with a Toronto city planner resulted in a scholarly collaboration and the co-authorship of an article. Similarly, networking with various community partners will lead to close assistance with recruitment and outreach for the upcoming data collection phase. Finally, training opportunities were possible for various students at the Faculty of Information Studies (FIS). One in particular, Danielle Allard (a doctoral candidate at FIS) contributed actively to the IPEC research project. Through her work as a research assistant for the IPEC project, Danielle has gained both practical experience as a researcher, as well as theoretical grounding that informed her own dissertation research. She was given the opportunity to: 1) participate in the University of Toronto ethics process including drafting and revising ethics submission documents; 2) participate in creating and drafting research tools such as the questionnaire; 3) participate in report and academic paper writing; 4) participate in interviewing participants and developing interviewing skills; and 5) making community contacts and learning to work collaboratively with community ISAs who may have different research needs and agendas than the research team itself. In addition, work on this project has significantly informed Danielle's own dissertation research, which explores how new immigrants use transnational networks to seek settlement information in the local Canadian context. The IPEC project has exposed her to a number of theoretical concepts (such as the notion of transnationalism, social capital, and the value of social networks in information practices) that have informed her current research. It is also through the process of interacting

with new immigrants as well as the organizations that serve them, that she has gained a much richer understanding of the issues and barriers newcomers face as they try to find relevant information in a "foreign" context.

Two other students were more marginally involved in other aspects of the research, particularly the related projects (Susan MacDonald and Diane Dechief, both doctoral students at FIS).

Synopsis

The purpose of this study was to examine the information practices (i.e., needs, uses and seeking behaviour) of people who have newly immigrated to Canada. We conducted an extensive review and synthesis of the literature, and set the stage for a future large empirical study by designing instruments (a questionnaire survey using a Social Network Analysis approach, and an interview guide). Preliminary findings from the literature review and the two related studies we completed emphasize the role of social networks (both local and transnational) as a means to facilitate the settlement and inclusion process, and possibly leading to increased opportunities. Life-world perspectives are also deemed critical in many aspects of immigrants' settlement as is the role played by "gatekeepers" (individuals who are considered to be knowledgeable within communities, and can "monitor" flows of information). Although the proliferation of technology does, to a certain extent, make "place" (including having resources available in one's neighbourhood) less important when information seeking, we also found that information institutions such as the public library are not necessarily located where immigrants to Toronto are settling. Lastly, there is a strong relationship between information practices and identity building, particularly as immigrants strive to build new lives, habits, and networks in an unknown information context.