

Kuhlthau's Model: Interview with information seeker MF

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### **Abstract**

The information-seeking behavior of a freelance journalism MF, who is highly skilled in both library and online searches, reveals that he followed the model outlined by Carol Collier Kuhlthau with few exceptions. The two places in which MF's search process and Kuhlthau's model diverge are in the sixth stage, presentation, and in MF's emotions during the process and how he deals with the emotions. In the sixth stage, MF doesn't outline his writing as described in Kuhlthau's 1986 longitudinal study of four adult information seekers working on college papers. One commonality between MF's process and Kuhlthau's adult information seekers is that MF generally doesn't seek a moderator, such as a librarian. To determine why people skilled at information seeking don't ask for moderators, more research must be conducted.

*Keywords:* journalist, online searches, casino resorts.

## Kuhlthau's Model: Interview with information seeker MF

The research into American Indian resorts in the Northwest conducted by MF, a journalist with years of experience using libraries and online searches, closely follows the information-seeking model outlined by Carol Collier Kuhlthau's research. Kuhlthau found six stages of information seeking -- initiation, selection, formulation, collection and presentation -- in her 1986 study of four adults writing college papers (Kuhlthau, 2004). MF experienced fewer instances of negative emotions, as compared to Kuhlthau's students and he appears to have remained focused throughout his search. MF's search process and Kuhlthau's model diverged in the sixth stage, presentation, with MF following a different writing strategy and in how MF dealt with his emotions during the process. MF's years of experience with information seeking and understanding of his own personal process (MF, personal communication. October 18, 2009) appear to make a difference in how he works through barriers and negative emotions that he encountered during his research.

MF, a 57-year-old white man living in southern King County, has been a journalist for 33 years. When it comes to learning style, MF finds that reading is the best way for him to absorb "fact-based knowledge" (MF, personal communication, October 18, 2009). This appears to be verbal-linguistic intelligence as described in Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (as cited by Dow, 2009); however, testing would be needed to make an accurate assessment. Although neither of MF's parents attended college, his family's Jewish culture placed a "high value" on education and the "pursuit of knowledge" (MF, personal communication).

When it comes to using technology for information seeking, MF considers himself as highly skilled, especially with online searches. Starting as a child, MF has nearly five decades of experience using libraries. In college, he took a class in library research. With the advent of

online searching, his skills evolved. Over the course of his journalism career, he's used information from various sources that he obtained online or at a library, as well as conducted personal interviews. For approximately the past decade, he has been self-employed as a freelance journalist and has primarily used online searches and interviews to obtain information for work assignments. Regarding changes in information seeking, he comments: "The truth is the Web has made it so much easier. ... These days most of (my) research is for journalist pursuits. For a more general audience, you don't need the depth and specificity, and I'm working more or less on deadline." (MF, personal communication, October 18, 2009.)

MF was interviewed by phone Sunday, October 18, 2009, by Marta Murvosh, a graduate student in Emporia State University's School of Library and Information Science. Murvosh conducted the interview of MF using open-ended neutral questions, as Brenda Dervin defined in 1981 (Dervin, 1986). For clarification and to ensure accuracy, Murvosh also asked MF a few direct questions to follow up on some his responses.

To find an information seeker, Murvosh posted a request for an interview October 12, 2009, on the Writers [sic] Cramp listserv, which consists of 54 writers, through the group's Yahoo user group. Writers Cramp is a fiction writers' critique group based in King County. In the interest of intellectual honesty, Murvosh discloses that she and MF have been acquainted for several years and have several mutual acquaintances and friends, are both members of the Society for Professional Journalists, and have attended the same professional conventions and other events. Both are inactive members of Writers Cramp; however, they were not active at the same time.

During the interview, MF described his information seeking strategies and three searches. For the purpose of this paper, Murvosh concentrated on the search that MF described first and in

the most detail. MF sought information to write an article on American Indian casinos expanding into the resort business *Alaskan Airlines Magazine*, the airline's in-flight magazine, MF went to the internet for much of his information, conducted two phone interviews, and visited two casino resorts.

The magazine editor prompted MF's search by assigning the story to him. The editor determined the article's focus, telling MF to focus on attractions other than gambling. She gave him a list of approximately 20 casino resorts that she wanted included in the story. MF felt familiar with the topic because he had recently written two articles for other publications that touched on Indian casinos and gaming. He also felt good about the topic in part because his livelihood depends on receiving this type of work (MF, personal communication).

MF's reaction to an assigned topic contrasts dramatically with the adults studied by Kuhlthau. Those students preferred selecting a topic because it made them more motivated (Kuhlthau, 2004). MF's reactions appear to be tied to his desire to make his editor happy, which could result in receiving future assignments and thus more pay.

To start his research, MF conducted online searches using the web sites of the casino and resorts on the editor's list. He made lists consisting of each resort's types of gambling devices, the number of gaming machines, specialty room suites, restaurants, and entertainment venues, as well as brief descriptions. He also looked at web sites focused on travel and consumer reviews of the various resorts for general background. (MF, personal communication).

Differing from the experiences of Kuhlthau's adult seekers, MF appears to have been very confident and focused at the start of his search. The first four stages – from initiation to formulation – were compressed when compared to those stages as experienced by the adults in Kuhlthau's study. After his initial searches, MF described feeling satisfied at the quantity and

quality of the general information available on the resort web sites, but as he reviewed his research, he realized that a story listing numbers of rooms and video poker machines would be “dull.” As a result of that realization, MF felt a “sense of trepidation” (MF, personal communication), similar to the doubt experienced by Kuhlthau's adult students in the third, exploration, stage (Kuhlthau, 2004). He remembers thinking: “Oh, my God, I've got all this information, and it's really not gelling into a story” (MF, personal communication).

At that point, MF proceeded to another strategy to gather information – a strategy he had planned to use at the start. He organized the basic information that he had gathered, “worked up” a list of questions, and e-mailed six casinos with interview requests. He received two responses, which he found encouraging.

“I've gotten used to sending out scattershot requests and only getting a fraction of responses. In the end, that's easier. If you end up with eight responses – people calling you up and giving you interviews – they usually don't have a lot of different things to say, and you have to spend a lot of time wading through, looking for the three to four quotes you use” (MF, personal communication).

The resulting interviews gave MF lively quotes from people who conveyed excitement and enthusiasm about their respective resorts. He expressed confidence that the information from the interviews would improve the article. “...Having people makes it more of a story.” MF realization of the interviews' importance is similar to the recognition of a “critical source,” as defined by Kuhlthau's model (Kuhlthau, 2004).

MF appears to constantly evaluate the quality of information he found. His criteria were based on the parameters of his editor's assignment. His evaluation appears to be an almost unconscious sorting while he sought and reviewed the information he found and while he wrote the article. For example, MF realized at the beginning of his search that he needed to have people as sources to prevent the article from being “dull.” Had those interviews not gone well he would

have sought other people to interview.

MF encountered few barriers during the course of the information search. The biggest barrier occurred when he visited an aging casino in Pierce County. He had mistakenly driven to the casino, rather than the newer resort, also owned by the same tribe. MF found the casino to be “rundown,” filled with stale cigarette smoke, and it compared poorly to the other resort he visited, the newer, “upscale” casino resort in Snohomish County.

“I was also distressed from the point of view of writing the article. ... There was a really short while [sic] of a lagging concern of ‘Jeez, What are you going to say about this? No one flying on Alaskan Air is going to want to read how depressing the (Pierce County casino) is, and the editor doesn’t want that.’ So there was what am I going to say about the (casino) that isn’t totally dishonest? That was the downer in the whole thing” (MF, personal communication).

As he roamed through the casino, MF realized that the resort, which the editor had directed him to include, was a few miles away on the same road. Later in his research and writing process, he visited to online review sites that featured the Pierce County casino to see what other people found positive about the facility (MF, personal communication), thus satisfying an “information gap” as described by Brenda Dervin (as cited by Case, D. O., 2007). The information from the online reviews helped MF decide to only mention the casino lounge acts, which are revivals of 1970s and 1980s bands. He felt “compelled” to include the casino because it was on the editor’s list (MF, personal communication, October 18, 2009).

After his site visits and phone interviews were both completed, MF started writing. As he thought about the structure of the article, the collection stage of his information search, he encountered another barrier. When he received the assignment, MF and the editor had discussed organizing the article by region, but MF quickly realized that the article would be “too repetitive” if he used repeated lists organized by each Northwestern state or province. He felt “trepidation” because the deadline was approaching quickly. (MF, personal communication).

MF's emotions were different from the confidence experienced by the four adults in Kuhlthau's study (Kuhlthau, 2004) at the presentation stage. MF decided to change the article's proposed structure and grouped the casino resorts with similar attractions together. For instance, resorts with golf courses became one section. "That way I got 17 or 18 casinos in the article and covered a whole range of entertainment" (MF personal communication).

MF recognizes that the emotions he experiences while seeking information seeking and just before writing as part of the research process. At the start of his career, MF developed a strategy to work through the anxiety he experiences as he moves from the collection to presentation stage. This anxiety, while short lived, is different from the confidence Kuhlthau's adults experienced. To overcome that negative emotion, MF sits down at his computer and starts writing. "I just need to get the first 200 to 300 words, and then I'm on a roll" (MF, personal communication, October 18, 2009).

During the writing process, MF found information gaps and returned to the various casinos' web sites for additional information, such as on the history of casinos in the Northwest and other details that MF felt made the article more interesting. "I'm always aware of that the fact that the job is storytelling, even though the bulk of the story was to some degree a laundry list of casinos and their amenities" (MF, personal communication).

MF thought his completion of his article was successful (MF, personal communication). However, MF's determination appears tied to his editor's lack of reaction during the two weeks since he submitted the article and the interview with Murvosh. MF indicated that in his experience, the editor would have contacted him if she had any problems with his research (MF, personal communication).

MF's feelings of either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with role of librarians as moderators



is unknown at this time and would require more research because he didn't use a moderator. The possibility of seeking a moderator, such as a librarian, appears to not have occurred to him because he didn't encounter any barriers that he couldn't overcome. However, it appears unlikely he would not have sought help from his editor, as a potential moderator, because he tries to avoid giving editors "heartburn" (MF, personal communication).

One commonality between MF's information search and Kuhlthau's findings among four adult information seekers is that they generally didn't seek moderators, such as a librarian. More research needs to be conducted to determine the reasons people who are skilled at information seeking don't ask for moderators during searches. It may be that MF doesn't seek a moderator because he is confident in his own skills and doesn't want to appear less skilled by discussing barriers with an editor.

In MF's case, his understanding of the role that negative emotions, such as "trepidation," have in the information seeking process and his personal writing process appears to be even more evolved than the understanding exhibited by the adults as compared to teens in Kuhlthau's study. "I've learned to trust that whole process, even when I'm trying to get a hold of people who are recalcitrant in responding" (MF, personal communication, October 18, 2009). This "trust" is similar to Kuhlthau's findings from her survey of the adult information seekers whose experience taught them to expect their topics to evolve and their own thoughts and emotions to evolve during the information seeking process (Kuhlthau, 2004).

In spite of his "trust" in the research and writing process, MF had found that when he can't find the information he needs, it is just as "nerve-racking" as it was at the start of his career. Since his livelihood depends on meeting deadlines, his strategy is to proceed as if he will obtain the information he needs by his deadlines (MF, personal communication).

MF's reaction to barriers in information seeking raises the question of what factors – such as age or maturity, the level of information-seeking experience and professional expertise – temper his emotional reaction to barriers during a search. Additional studies would need to be conducted to determine how often other journalists or professionals who are savvy at information searches seek help, what barriers might they experience to seeking such help, such as deadline pressures, and how those results would compare to other groups of information seekers, such as adults writing a college paper.

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