Impact-Driven Work: Tearing Down the Firewalls between Research and Practice

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ABSTRACT
This panel will showcase information research that aims to have strong impact on community at the local or national level and offer ideas for increasing the impact of information research on communities. It will also engage audience members in an interactive discussion of ideas for increasing the real-life impact of information research.

Keywords
Information behavior, community informatics, information science, information literacy, research impact.

INTRODUCTION
Lawyers complain about it. Librarians grumble over it. Educators bemoan it. Across all of these professions, there exists a perceived mismatch between research and practice (e.g. Cross, 1998; Renihan & Renihan, 2015). As a scholarly community we must ask ourselves: How can we maximize the impact of our research on humans’ lives, thereby maximizing the societal value of our work? This panel will showcase impact-driven information research that aims to have strong influence on community at the local or national level. It will also engage audience members in an interactive discussion of ideas for increasing the real-life impact of information research.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE
Bates (2012) has suggested that “All professions require the mastery of a body of general theory and understanding, which the practitioner then applies selectively, as needed, to a series of real-world problems” (p. 11). Still, in many cases the connections between scholarly research and human information behaviors and practices are unclear. In the field of library and information science (LIS), for example, “The relationship between research and practice…has long been troubled, and the difficulties of communicating research to practice in the field have been much discussed” (Klobas & Clyde, 2010, p. 237).

Information research has the potential to make major impacts on information practice—on both professional practice, via the improved design of information services and information systems, and by extension on people’s “everyday life information practices” (Savolainen, 2008), via their use of research-influenced information services and systems.

Why, then, do we see researchers, practitioners, and even members of the public questioning the practical value of information research? One answer might lie in the established processes for disseminating academic research. Grover (2014) has suggested that academic publishing requirements lead researchers to avoid “dealing with big ideas” – ideas and problems with the potential for strong impact on society (p. 839). He explained that academic publishing requires:

picking an interesting problem and framing it with an abstract reference to discipline theory…. The question of usefulness to practice requires a layer of effort (another “means-ends” cycle) that our journal and institutional processes are not incentivized to deal with. There may be more value, at least for the practitioner constituency, hidden in our research, if we could translate our broad social implications to concepts in action (p. 839).

But how do we succeed in translating the implications of our research into action? With an eye toward understanding the ways in which research most commonly affects professional and daily life practices, HCI researchers Gray, Stolterman, and Siegel (2014) explored both the bubble-up effect and the trickle-down effect. The bubble-up effect describes the efforts of the practice community—and ideally the academic community as well—to refine and abstract situated knowledge and practice of methods, tools, or concepts into refined
theory and defined tools and methods. The trickle-down effect follows the more traditional research tradition, denoting and describing the way adaptation of research and theory is commonly seen to take place in design practice, including the opportunistic use of methods, tools, or concepts that originate in an academic community. (p. 725)

They concluded that “research and theory should be grounded in and informed by practice, and remain connected to known disseminating agents within design practice to have immediate and lasting benefits” (p. 733).

Unfortunately, it appears that much information research is unsuccessful at creating these meaningful connections between research and practice. In the UK, for instance, Cruickshank, Hall, and Taylor-Smith (2011) examined the extent to which funded research projects influenced LIS practice. The results of their study indicated that: “the level of impact a project enjoys depends on a number of factors, most importantly how it is planned and conceived, the extent to which practitioners are involved in its execution, and how its findings are reported” (p. 4). They concluded that only a minority of the funded studies they reviewed had significant effects on practice.

THE GOALS OF THE PANEL
This panel will focus on identifying specific methods for increasing the impact of information research on professional and everyday life information practices. Researchers from Drexel University’s Center for the Study of Libraries, Information, & Society (CSLIS) will describe some of their ongoing research projects and explain their successes and challenges in making real-life impacts with their work. The panel discussion will be followed by an interactive discussion and ideas sharing session with audience members interested sharing lessons learned from their own experiences in connecting information research and practice.

PANEL PRESENTATIONS
Denise E. Agosto, “Translating Research Findings into Tools for Public Education: The Case of Teens and Social Media”
There is a large and growing body of research into teens’ use of social media, much of which includes guidelines for teaching best online practices. Unfortunately, in many cases schools and libraries base their social media lessons and programs more on stereotypical views of teens’ technology practices and on exaggerated fears of possible exposure to risk than on user-centered research. As a result, all too often teens view social media education in schools and libraries as unappealing, irrelevant, and a waste of their time (Agosto & Abbas, under review). With the goal of creating positive impacts on teens’ social media practices, I have been experimenting with different methods of delivering research results directly to teachers and librarians who design social media lessons and programs. The panel presentation will draw on two recent research projects to discuss issues related to translating research results into materials for practitioners and to difficulties in identifying and accessing key members of target audiences.

Denise Bedford, “Knowledge Index for Cities: Taking Knowledge Management to the Community”
In the knowledge economy, intellectual capital is the primary factor of production. While there are many dimensions to intellectual capital, it only grows through knowledge transactions among people. According to the intellectual capital and knowledge economics literature, a “knowledge city” is comprised of: 1) an innovative business environment; 2) a knowledge-rich culture; 3) a strong civic context characterized by rich citizen participation, knowledgeable public officials, knowledge-grounded laws and judicial bodies, and open and free public discourse; 4) an environment that supports well-being, health, and safety; 5) investment in the development of every individual’s intellectual capital, and 6) a rich cultural context that provides opportunities for creative engagement and development for all citizens. The Knowledge Index for Cities puts a research model directly into the hands of city administrators, faith-based organizations, neighborhood groups, and voluntary organizations to give them the tools they need to set a future vision for their knowledge cities. The architecture of the Index goes beyond a data repository, registry, and analytics engine to put actionable information into the hands of citizens. The presentation will discuss the Index and how it is used in community-based organizations. Audience members will walk away from this presentation with an understanding of how they can engage citizens in their city to build an index, and how they can contribute to the index based on their research.

Michael Khoo, “Ethnographic Action Research in LIS”
Ethnographic action research analyzes and shapes change in organizations, through embedded parallel activities of theory building, intervention, and action-taking. Research investigations and outcomes are constituted mutually over time between researchers and subjects (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999; Tacchi, 2003). Two examples will be introduced. First, a collaboration with Gary Rosenberg, Chair of Malacology, the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, is using Communities of Practice theory (Wenger, 1998) to look at ways to extract new metadata from historical specimen labels. Practical outcomes include augmented metadata suitable for sharing with the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF, 2015). Second, a collaboration with Danuta Nitecki (Dean of Libraries, Drexel University), and W. Michael Johnson (CUNY and practicing architect) is drawing on Scott Bennett’s (2009) theories of library architectonics and intentional learning, to study space, place and learning at the Drexel Library. Practical outcomes of the project include contributions to the design of the Library at all levels, (https://www.library.drexel.edu/chapman; Khoo et al.,
Delia Neuman, “Teaching Information and Digital Literacy in a High-Poverty Urban School: A Case Study of an I-LEARN Project”

Two teachers and 49 kindergarteners and second graders worked with a team of researchers to complete an inquiry-based project based on Neuman’s (2011) I-LEARN model—a learning model that builds on and expands information-seeking models to address the nature and processes of using information resources for learning. Located in one of the first Promise Zones designated by the Obama administration, the children’s school has no library and serves students who are both economically disadvantaged and struggling to achieve academic proficiency. A major finding is that even young children can complete inquiry-based projects successfully with adequate support. Of particular interest is the finding that the kindergartners (whose teacher had a background in school librarianship) achieved higher levels of digital and information literacy than the second graders (whose teacher did not have such a background). This finding has serious implications for helping students in similar settings achieve information and digital literacy. In particular, the research raises the very practical question of what the information professions can do to ensure that all children—including disadvantaged ones—become information literate. With school libraries in urban public schools disappearing, becoming only reading rooms or storytelling venues, and relying increasingly on volunteers, how can our research create and validate new models that will help children without access to school libraries gain the information and digital skills they need to survive and thrive in the 21st century?

PANEL FORMAT

The panel will begin with brief, eight-minute overviews from each researcher describing his/her project, its target audience, and the intended impact on that audience. The moderator will then ask the panelists to respond to the following questions: 1) What methods did you employ to increase the impact of your research on the target community? 2) What were your greatest successes in creating impact on the target community? 3) What were your greatest challenges in creating impact on the target community? 4) What did you learn that you wish you had known before you set out to try to create a high-impact research project? Next, we will turn to the audience to ask about their challenges and successes in creating high-impact work. Audience discussion questions will include: 1. In terms of both research and practice, what do you consider to be your “community” or “communities”? 2. How much is creating work with high impact on community a focus of your research efforts? 3. To what extent do researchers from non-academic institutions (industry, nonprofits, government agencies, etc.) conduct more practice-oriented research than academic researchers? 4. What challenges have you faced when trying to create high-impact work? Or, what barriers prevent you from maximizing the community impact of your work? 5. What have been your greatest successes related to maximizing the impact of your work, and what related advice do you have for others? We will compile audience input into a list of suggestions to follow and pitfalls to avoid in creating high-impact information research. The list will be made freely available online after the conclusion of the session and distributed to interested audience members.

The Projects

The Panel Members

Denise E. Agosto is Professor and Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Libraries, Information, & Society (CSLIS) at the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University. Her research and teaching interests focus on youths’ information behaviors and practices, youths’ use of social media, and on public library services.

Denise Bedford is Instructor at Georgetown University and a member of the CSLIS Steering Committee at the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University. His sociotechnical research investigates the use of libraries, archives, museums, and digital repositories. He combines theories of practice from anthropology, philosophy, and user-centered design with an ethnographic action research approach, working closely with local stakeholders to develop complementary theoretical and practical outcomes.

Michael Khoo is an Assistant Teaching Professor and a member of the CSLIS Steering Committee at the College of Computing & Informatics at Drexel University. His sociotechnical research investigates the use of libraries, archives, museums, and digital repositories. He combines theories of practice from anthropology, philosophy, and user-centered design with an ethnographic action research approach, working closely with local stakeholders to develop complementary theoretical and practical outcomes.

Delia Neuman is a Professor and the Director of the School Library Media (SLiM) Program and has studied children’s use of information resources for learning for over twenty years. She currently works with three faculty members in the School of Education at Drexel University—Professors Allen Grant, Vera Lee, and Mary Jean Tecce DeCarlo—on a research agenda focused on the implementation of the I-LEARN model.

REFERENCES


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