Building Information Worlds through Community and Experience: Preliminary Findings of an Ethnographic Study of Vehicle Residents' Information Practices

Kaitlin E. Montague[a]

[a]Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey, USA

kaitlin.montague@rutgers.edu

ABSTRACT

Across the United States, an estimated one million people inhabit vehicles as their primary method of housing. While vehicles are among the most common shelters aside from brick-and-mortar homes, few studies have explored this populace. This is among the first studies that investigate vehicle residents from an information perspective. Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, this study seeks to explore vehicle residents' information practices and the resources and source preferences used to support their daily lives. The end goal is to understand how information institutions, namely public libraries, can create service provisions to offer support. Through an information worlds lens, coupled with information horizon interviews, this research seeks to examine how trust is built within this community through information seeking via other vehicle residents. Preliminary findings suggest that the trust constructed within this information world directly impacts vehicle residents' decisions to turn to their community for information.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information needs; Information seeking; Specific populations; Sociology of information; Public libraries.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Information practice; information worlds; vehicle residents; information seeking; trust.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the United States (US), about one million people inhabit vehicles as their primary method of housing in public spaces; however, exact counts are nearly impossible given this population's inherent geographic mobility. The habitation of vehicles as an affordable housing option is increasing as unsheltered homelessness is growing in the Western US (Berton, 2020; Carlton & Parker, 2020; Giamarino et al., 2023; Pruss, 2023). However, few studies have explored this populace, and this is among the first to investigate vehicle residents through an information lens.

Based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in California and Arizona, this research explores vehicle residents' information practices and the resources and source preferences used to support their daily lives. The aim is to understand how information institutions, namely public libraries, can create service provisions to help support this marginalized community. Through an information worlds lens (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), coupled with information horizon interviews (Sonnenwald et al., 2001), this research seeks to examine how trust is built within this community through information seeking via community members. Preliminary findings suggest that the trust constructed within this information world directly impacts vehicle residents' information seeking processes and decisions to turn to other vehicle residents for everyday information seeking and support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A large body of research has shown that immigrants and refugees, other traditionally mobile populations, prefer to seek information from others with whom they share their lifeworld, such as family, friends, and community members rather than from institutions, the Internet, and public service departments (i.e. government offices and public libraries), among other societally typical resources (Fisher, 2018; Lloyd, 2014; Muhambe, 2018). These information seeking processes that further promote searching and sharing within one's established community lays the foundation for a small world. Chatman's (1991) small world construct consists of the social environments in which interconnected groups of individuals live, work, and join together through interests, behaviors, expectations, economic status, and geographic location. Whether geographically or economically constrained, small worlds access a wealth of information resources and are small in that their day-to-day activities and interests are structured and defined by an identifiable set of social norms specific to the limited context of the world itself (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). Jaegar and Burnett (2010) consider Habermas's (1992) concept of lifeworld in their explanation of a small world as they implement the reaching across a culture as members of a specific social collective share a lifeworld. Habermas (1992) identifies a lifeworld as collective information and social environment that braids together the various information resources, perspectives, and voices of all members of a society.

Chatman (1991) does not holistically account for what exists outside of a specific small world, the impact of the broader social context within which a small world exists, or the ways that worlds interact with one another, while Habermas (1992) does not delve into the ways the

broader lifeworld might be instantiated within or might interact with a localized context and specific community (Burnett & Jaeger, 2008). Therefore, information worlds developed from the weaknesses in the aforementioned theoretical works. Chatman considers the micro-context of an individual's information behavior, and Habermas the macro-context of societies (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010 p. 8). In their work on information worlds, Jaeger and Burnett (2010, p. 8) establish five societal elements as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1
Jaeger and Burnett's (2010, p.8) societal elements of information worlds

Societal Element	Definition
Norms	a shared understanding of the acceptability of different kinds of observable behaviors within a world
Social Types	or the particular social roles played by individuals – and, particularly, how they are perceived or "typed" by others – within a world
Information Value	an agreed-upon perception of what kinds of information are of value within a world and what kinds are not
Information Behavior	the normative activities and practices related to information gathering, use, avoidance, etc.
Boundaries	interfaces between worlds are points at which worlds come into contact with one another

Jaegar and Burnett (2010) added a fifth notion to Chatman's (1991) core concepts of small worlds—boundaries—while also renaming the concept of "worldview" as information value to suggest not only that each world has its own agreed-upon scale for assessing the importance of different kinds of information but also that the kind of value attached to information may differ from world to world (Fisher, 2018).

Research Questions

A set of research questions guided my study, design, and implementation:

RQ1. What are vehicle residents' information practices?
RQ1a. How do they access information necessary to support their daily lives?
RQ2. How does place and mobility impact vehicle residents' information access?
RQ2a. How do they decide where to park?
RQ2b. How are their decisions shaped by their perceptions of parking policies and regulations?

METHODS

Field Sites

My first round of fieldwork took place from June-October 2024 in Santa Cruz, CA and my second round took place from January 2024-February 2024 along the Arizona/CA border. During round two, I lived in my vehicle to attended four free events open to the vehicle resident community—the Women's Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (WRTR), the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous (RTR), Skooliepalooza, and Van Aid. I entered the community as a volunteer with the National Vehicle Residency Collective (NVRC), a human rights advocacy organization that centers the

needs of people living in vehicles that works to advocate and decriminalize vehicle residency and stop the closure of public spaces, while also educating the public on issues related to vehicle residency.

Data Collection

This multi-method ethnographic study utilized information horizon interviews (Sonnenwald et al., 2001), guided tours of participants' vehicles (Thomson, 2018), and photographs of participants' immediate information spaces and environments (Hartel & Thomson, 2011). Information horizon interviews were used to encourage participants to describe their information seeking process, information resources, and whether they were useful. Interview questions were followed by a drawing component where participants hand drew a diagram of themselves surrounded by their most frequently used information sources, while justifying their information source preferences aloud. During the guided tour, participants led me through their vehicle while describing and explaining its features, thinking aloud feelings and ideas that arose (e.g., how they built different parts of the interior, which areas felt like home). Lastly, during the tour, I took photos of participants' immediate information spaces with the aim of analysing both information horizon maps and these photographs in tandem.

Data Analysis

I transcribed audio recorded portions of the information horizon interviews as a means of staying close to the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). I analysed transcripts and field notes using abductive analysis to identify themes and illustrative quotations (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). During content analysis, I used abduction to conduct parallel and equal engagement with empirical data and extant theoretical understanding (Thompson, 2022) while also using visual analysis for photographs and information horizon maps (Rose, 2012).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

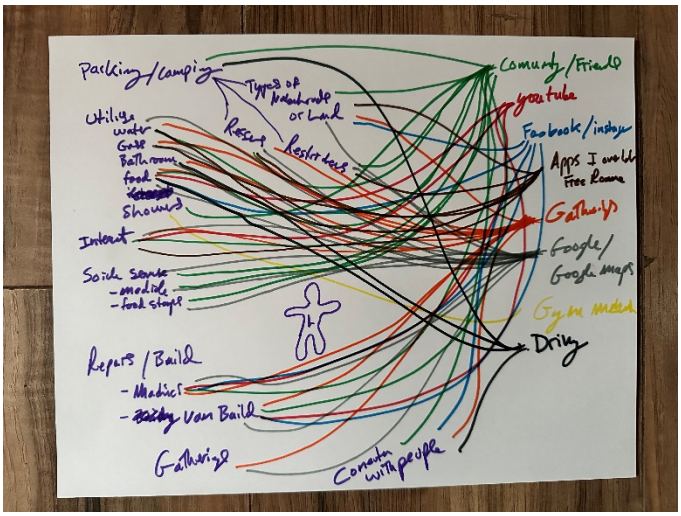
The final sample included three non-binary people, ten females, eight males, and two heterosexual couples for a total of 25 participants. Their ages ranged from 25-76.

Preliminary findings are consistent with Jaeger and Burnett's (2010) theory of information worlds, specifically information value and boundaries. Initial results suggest that vehicle residents create their own information worlds where trusted information is derived from insiders. Initial findings indicate that information world boundaries determine the value of specific pieces of information. For instance, when vehicle residents need specific information to support their daily life, it is most common for them to seek out information from community members as a result of previous negative experiences with outsiders in specific contexts. These encounters between worlds—for instance, a challenging incident with a mechanic who does not understand the amount of assurance required on the vehicle residents' behalf to trust them with their vehicle, that is also their home—results in vehicle residents' turning to the community for support and information. Negative interactions between worlds create a boundary within vehicle residents' information worlds.

Two information horizon maps from the drawing component of the interview are shared below, out of the 25 maps that were collected in the field. In Figure 1, Laffrey (39, non-binary person) depicted their information horizon map by organizing the type of information need on one side of the page and connected each need with their information resolution and source preference. They specify community and relationships on both sides of the page to indicate the importance of community as both a need and a trusted resource preference. On the left, Laffrey

directly connects repairs/build to community/friends, Facebook/Instagram, and gatherings. They explained, “The community has helped me figure out auto and mechanical stuff. Both through literally helping me out and through referrals and my actual build and knowledge there. Referrals and friends’ experiences are so important because they get it. We’ve all had crap experiences in this realm, so we support each other.”

Figure 1
Laffrey’s information horizon map



While drawing their information horizon map, Laffrey connected community to almost every resource, clearly noting that community is their predominant information source preference for many everyday resources. They explained the ways they think about community as an information resource:

> I will connect [internet] to Community because that is something I will check with people for. Like what is the service like out there? And I’ve literally gotten the resource of Internet from friends…At Skoolie[palooza], my partner had to work remotely and I knew that we couldn’t just do it with hotspots…but that we would need Starlink and so I checked to make sure that some of my friends…had Starlink before we knew this could actually work...We literally depend on them for certain resources.

Laffrey and their partner relied on their community’s access to Internet and their attendance at the Skooliepalooza gathering was based on their internet and information access. As they continued with their information horizon map, Laffrey continued to emphasize the importance of community for vehicle residents:

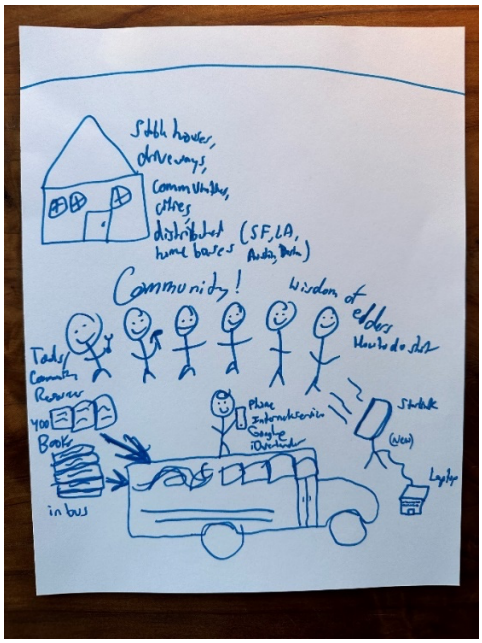
> Gatherings should be on both sides [information need and information resource] because its’s a way that I get things and it’s also a resource, but this also coincides with community right, it’s something I need and a resource. Connection with people is so important and I do that in many ways and I need it for me and for the

right information. Community and first-hand experiences are kind of the only way to do this.

Aidan (25, male), the community deemed "Skooliepalooza Librarian," maintains a school bus filled with over 400 books across genres and age ranges, to offer "library services" at nomadic gatherings. He developed a circulation process for community members while also offering his bus as a central gathering location. Below, Aidan's information horizon map and his bus in Figure 1 emphasizes the importance of community.

Figure 1

Aidan's information horizon map and library bus



It would be cool if there could be more caravans…Places like this [Skooliepalooza] are important. This is like a city…a neighborhood…and to have more cities like this, that are on public land, free and well taken care of and are kind of like bases where nomads can find each other—there should be more of this than just here or in Quartzsite [AZ]. People need community. People need cities. People need connections, even nomads. They need a library. I want more of this.

The above examples illustrate how vehicle residents utilize community as both an information need and resource based on the trust built within the community. Participants past experiences with outsiders dictated the value of specific information, resulting in distrust with information from outside of their world. Therefore, information value creates boundaries where vehicle residents' information worlds intersect with broader society. As data analysis progresses, I except to further examine how boundaries are created in information worlds.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Requiring significant time in the field involved in participant observation and longer form interviews, ethnography as a method greatly limits sample size and trades breadth for depth. The information horizons methodology has limitations due to its self-reporting nature as the researcher is reliant on the participants drawings and description for results. Lastly, this paper depicts a preliminary analysis. More in-depth assessment will be developed in my dissertation and further publications.

Theoretical implications highlight the importance of community as an information resource and support system for vehicle residents. Initial findings echo Jaegar and Burnett's (2010) concepts of information worlds while emphasizing the how the boundaries of worlds dictate information value within this world. Practical implications support the work of public libraries. Due to the placement of libraries in communities all over the US, better understanding how vehicle residents seek and use information can help public libraries offer support and implement appropriate service provision for this population.

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