Investigating Mobility, Place, and Information Access Through an Ethnographic Study of Vehicle Residents' Information Practices in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the United States, an approximated one million people currently inhabit vehicles parked in publicly accessible areas as their primary method of housing. This dissertation explores vehicle residents' information seeking practices and barriers to information access. Library and Information science (LIS) research has not developed theory related to place, mobility, and information access, despite living in a hyper-mobile world. LIS primarily centers online information behaviors, limiting potential impact on larger populations that face unique barriers to information access. While some studies constructed theory to address the function of place in information behavior, few interrogate how place and mobility impact information access despite geographic mobility serving important functions in various theory constructions. To address the importance of place and mobility in the context of information access, I conducted a multi-method, ethnographic study. Completing two rounds of deeply embedded fieldwork from June-October 2023 in Santa Cruz, California (CA) and from January-February 2024 along the Southern CA and Arizona (AZ) border, I used participant observation, information horizon interviews, and guided tours and photographs of participant's vehicles to explore vehicle residents' information practices and information source preferences. I determined my key findings in Spring 2024; they reveal that participants experience micro-fractures in their information landscapes when moving through new information environments. Identifying vehicle residents' information practices and most used information sources can help public libraries and other information institutions implement improved support services for this growing population as public libraries are well positioned to bolster information access on behalf of its communities.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

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

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Information practice; information seeking; vehicle residents; information horizons; visual methods

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