

Opera enthusiasts: An information community

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Abstract

This research paper explores the information community of opera enthusiasts within the context of serious leisure. It adds to the understanding of how individuals interact with information in their day-to-day lives, which has practical implications for information professionals. The paper examines the information behavior of participants in the opera enthusiast community, including its information needs, preferred sources of information, social context, and ethical and legal concerns. It concludes with suggestions for improving resources and services to the opera enthusiast information community.

Introduction

I have chosen to study the information community of opera enthusiasts, which is of particular interest to me because I am a lyric coloratura soprano. The community includes teachers, students, and professional and amateur singers, musicians, directors, writers, and technicians. Although fans of opera may also consider themselves opera enthusiasts, this study defines the term "opera enthusiasts" as participants who, at some level, have contributed or are working toward contributing to actual opera productions. Only a small percentage of this community is employed full-time in an opera profession, but many of the remaining members are striving to break into the profession, are professionals who have alternative sources of income, are employed in related fields, or are past professionals who have moved on to other careers. Regardless of their professional status, all members share an interest in the acquisition and sharing of information pertaining to the world of opera.

A growing body of research studying various communities within the context of everyday life information seeking and serious leisure indicate that there may be some practical value to the field of information science. The study of the information behavior of opera enthusiasts would contribute to an understanding of how individuals react with information in their day-to-day lives as they pursue serious leisure activities. This understanding could lead to better resources and services provided by information professionals.

This paper will present a literature review of several influential authors in the fields of everyday life information seeking and serious leisure, along with studies that support these theories and provide a framework for my research. A discussion of the

methodology used for my research will follow. I will then place opera enthusiasts within the context of serious leisure, and discuss the main aspects of this community's information behavior. This will include the information needs of the community, its preferred sources of information, its social context, ethical and legal issues, and areas where resources and services for this community could be improved. The paper will conclude with a summary of my findings, an assessment of how well the information needs of opera enthusiasts are met, and suggestions of new resources and services that might be developed in the future.

Literature Review

A current trend in information science is to view information behavior in the context of everyday life information seeking (ELIS). Savolainen (2009) describes ELIS in the Context of Way of Life theory as the way in which individuals seek information within routine work and leisure activities of their ordinary lives (p. 1784).

Hartel (2009) argues that the study of leisure and hobby information activities has important implications for information science. Information sources such as libraries, museums and the Internet, which were once used primarily for academic purposes, now serve the needs of individuals pursuing leisure activities as well (p. 3263). This concept provides a basis for the connection between the study of leisure and information science.

Stebbins (2009) identifies three types of leisure: serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure (p. 622). Serious leisure is of particular interest in information science due to the critical role information plays in its activities, and has provided the basis for several studies.

Although none of the existing literature precisely identifies opera enthusiasts, several authors have studied communities that can be viewed in the context of ELIS and serious leisure. Liu and Stebbins (2014) develop the concept of concerted singing as a serious leisure pursuit. An analysis of in-depth interviews reveals that amateur concert singing meets the necessary qualities. Hartel (2006) focuses on information activities and resources in her study of gourmet cooking as a serious leisure activity. Chang (2007) presents an empirical study of the information seeking behavior of backpackers, whose information search process depends on the stage of travel. Fulton's (2009) article on amateur genealogists reveals the importance in this community of information sharing, reciprocal information behavior, and network positions.

Cox (2011) demonstrates how information behavior of food bloggers is influenced by the participant's level of involvement in the professional-amateur-public (PAP) system. In a subsequent study, Cox (2013) combines practice theory with information science in an observation of the information behavior of four types of personal photography. His study indicates that the character of a particular practice shapes the information activities within it.

Skov (2013) describes the information behavior of online museum visitors either for the purposes of planning visits, for self-motivated or assigned research, or for casual browsing.

In an article about online communities, Bayn (2007) describes the information behavior of Swedish independent music fans. Websites are interlinked and participants connect across multiple platforms.

Prior to the emergence of the Internet, Cobbedick (1996) explores the information seeking behavior of artists. Findings indicate that information needs of artists are diverse, and not necessarily art-related. Information seeking behaviors of practicing visual artists are the focus of Hemming's (2009) quantitative study. It suggests that artists' information needs are extremely idiosyncratic, include a wide variety of sources, and that social contexts are important.

Methodology

In devising a search strategy for materials relating to the information behavior of opera enthusiasts, I initially looked in a tertiary source for general writings on information seeking. The *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* contained chapters on "Everyday Life Information Seeking" and "Leisure and Hobby Information and Its Users." Both of these chapters were valuable to understanding current theories relevant to opera enthusiasts and their information activities.

An examination of assigned course readings for LIBR 200 revealed several articles pertaining to ELIS and information communities, which could be used as background information for my study. The keywords used in these articles helped me with the following phase of my research.

I next turned to the LIS electronic databases at SJSU in order to obtain more specific articles pertaining to the opera enthusiast information community. Using various subject terms and keywords, I systematically searched for general articles on ELIS, information communities, and leisure information users. Articles on leisure information behaviors were of particular interest to my research. As I discovered the trends in

studying information phenomena in leisure activities, I began to understand my information community within the context of serious leisure.

A specific search of the databases that included combinations of keywords such as "opera" and "serious leisure" yielded no results. Broadening my search to articles pertaining to "information community," combined with a variety of keywords such as "opera" and "music," were also unsuccessful. Eventually, a more general search for articles pertaining to "serious leisure" activities led me to several publications. I discovered articles on various information communities, several of which were studied within the context of serious leisure. Although none of the material dealt specifically with opera enthusiasts, articles on other communities were useful.

Another helpful research technique was checking the reference lists of relevant articles. I observed that the works of several authors were continually cited. This led me to acknowledge the important authors in this field of research.

Finally, I used Google Scholar to locate additional materials. Because of my prior searches within the SJSU databases, I looked for studies that would relate to opera enthusiasts as a serious leisure pursuit. I limited my searches to encompass articles on various serious leisure information activities, which led to several helpful writings.

To supplement the materials I obtained through my research of the course readings, the SJSU databases, and Google Scholar, I also relied on my own observations as a participant in this community for several years. I observed the information behaviors of opera enthusiasts on numerous blogs and web sites, with which I was already familiar. Following links from these sites led to the discovery of several other Internet resources that are used by this community.

Furthermore, I conducted interviews with two members of the opera enthusiast community regarding the type of information they seek, their preferred sources, and how they use this information. Due to the limited number of interviewees, responses are not necessarily representative, but contribute to a clearer understanding of member experiences. They allowed me to make a connection between the scholarly literature and the real life experiences of participants in my community. The interviews also revealed behaviors and issues specific to members of this group, prompting suggestions for information services that could be developed in the future.

Discussion

The Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP)

Stebbins (2009) develops a theoretical framework to describe three forms of leisure: serious leisure, casual leisure, and project-based leisure. Serious leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity. Casual leisure describes a short-lived pleasurable activity that requires no special training. Project-based leisure activities are one-shot or occasional innovative undertakings (p. 622).

Serious leisure is further defined by Stebbins (2009) according to six distinctive qualities. The first is the occasional need to persevere. Second is the goal of finding a career in the serious leisure activity. Third, the activity requires significant personal effort based on knowledge, training, experience or skill. Fourth, there are durable benefits, the most powerful of which is self-fulfillment. A fifth quality is the ethos of the social world of the serious leisure activity. This concept builds on Elfreda Chatman's research into small worlds as "social and cultural spaces" within which "ordinary people lead an everyday existence" (Fulton, 2010, p. 241). The sixth distinctive quality is that serious

leisure participants identify strongly with their chosen pursuits (Stebbins, 2009, p. 625-627).

Opera enthusiasts as serious leisure

Members of the opera enthusiast community persevere in their efforts to acquire knowledge and skill. It is the author's experience that singers in particular are lifelong learners, who continue to study and perfect their craft throughout their lives.

Self-fulfillment is a clear benefit for opera enthusiasts, one of whom observed in an interview: "Singing arias composed by the masters, like Mozart, Verdi, and Donizetti, can be a deeply spiritual experience."

Members identify strongly with the opera community and many seek to find a career in the field. This can be observed by the ongoing audition process and participation in professional and semi-professional productions and recitals. As in other performing arts, paid work in the opera world is sparse and irregular, and supplementary employment is often unavoidable. However, members of this community still define themselves in terms of their craft, as exemplified by the following quote from an interview:

I studied classical voice at Manhattan School of Music. I intended to become a professional opera singer, but I got married and had a family. My husband and I left New York City when we started our family. I became a music teacher, which is a much more reliable and practical career than singing! But I still consider myself an opera singer, and I like to keep up on what's happening in the opera world.

One interviewee indicates that members of the opera enthusiast community enjoy participating as members of a small world in which there are implicit understandings. She states, "We understand each other because all of us have been through rigorous training, and are dedicated and passionate." A shared language, with terminology that relates to opera music, voice types, composers, directors, opera companies, styles, singers, etc., is a typical feature of Chatman's Theory of Life in the Round (Fulton 2010). This special social world exemplifies one of Stebbins' critical components.

Opera enthusiasts fulfill all six distinctive qualities. Consequently, Stebbins model of serious leisure provides a framework with which to view opera enthusiasts.

Information needs

The information needs of opera enthusiasts can be understood by referring to the chapter on "Information Communities" by Fisher and Durrance (2003) in the *Encyclopedia of community: From the village to the virtual world*. The opera enthusiast community "forms around people's needs to access and use information in ways that people perceive as helpful" (p. 660). The information resources available for the opera community are a reflection of the specific demands of its members.

Examples of information needs include current events, celebrity news, live broadcasts, reviews, performance schedules, ticket sales, training programs, audition and other employment notices, sheet music, recorded music and videos. This type of information is helpful and useful to educators, students, artists, conductors, accompanists, directors and technical staff. Responses of interviewees indicate that opera enthusiasts seek and share information on a day-to-day basis. One opera enthusiast says that she visits her favorite opera news site weekly, her favorite blog several times a week, and

other sites occasionally. Members of the community also seek social platforms in order to connect with like-minded participants. The information behavior of opera enthusiasts can be considered ELIS as described by Savolainen (2009).

Preferred information sources

Traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio, magazines, and television are inefficient in their ability to provide the in-depth, current, and wide-ranging information needs of this community. Periodicals dedicated to opera are normally issued on a monthly or quarterly basis, and are limited in scope. Mainstream information providers that cater to a general audience, such as television and newspapers, devote little space to the world of opera.

Apart from an occasional search for sheet music, members who were interviewed expressed little interest in using their local public libraries for their information needs.

Based on observations of the author as a participant in the community, as well as responses from interviews, it is clear that opera enthusiasts carry out the Information Search Process (ISP) primarily on the Internet. The emergence of the Internet has given rise to a multitude of online resources for the opera community. The opera enthusiast community is typical of a new form of Internet organization described by Shirky in his book *Here Comes Everybody*. Opera enthusiasts take advantage of social media to engage in increasingly complex interactions with relative ease, little consideration for managerial functions, and at minimal cost (Shirky, 2008). Blogs and web pages that focus on different aspects of opera are accessible at all times to all members and are easily updated. New information is assimilated with previous knowledge, and creates a new, more complete view of the contemporary world of opera (Kuhlthau 1991).

Rather than obtaining all information in one place, opera enthusiasts gather bits of information from various sources. Bates (2009) calls this type of behavior "berrypicking" (p. 2393).

The opera enthusiast community "emphasizes collaboration among diverse groups that provide information and may share joint responsibility and resources" (Fisher & Durrance, 2003, p. 660). Opera websites typically focus on one or several themes, but often link to other websites that offer similar or related material. By providing links to related Internet resources, the entire community benefits from shared information.

The following websites provide examples of resources mentioned in interviews and known by the author. Opera enthusiasts frequently use these sites to fill their various information needs.

Opera Glass (<http://opera.stanford.edu>) and *The Aria Database* (<http://www.aria-database.com>) contain historical and bibliographical information concerning opera composers, performers, works, and terminology. This type of online resource is excellent for students, teachers, professionals, and fans of opera.

Opera Today (<http://www.operatoday.com>) is a website that "provides reviews of current performances, recordings, and books, interviews of performers, commentaries, and recent news items" (n.d.). It also contains a section with general historical information on various operas and links to blogs, online shops, and artist websites. *Opera Today* recruits reviewers and commentators from its users all over the world. Reviewers must follow guidelines, and articles are screened before they are published. The information provided by *Opera Today* is truly community-based, as its users are also its contributors.

Classical Singer (<http://www.classicalsinger.com>) publishes an online magazine with news and articles that pertain to professional, amateur, and student singers of opera and classical music. According to the website, *Classical Singer* is "dedicated to helping singers find opportunities and to providing resources for singers of all ages and levels" (n.d.). Links to directories and other resources are provided, as well as information concerning auditions, competitions, and study programs. Additionally, *Classical Singer* offers a platform and hosting service for singers to create and present personal artist websites.

Parterre (<http://parterre.com>) is a blog that comments on news in the opera world. It is aimed at all opera enthusiasts, particularly those with extensive knowledge in the field and an excellent sense of humor. The author is known by the fictitious name of his drag persona, "La Cieca," but is actually James Jorden, professional opera director and reviewer for the New York Post. Posts are highly opinionated, often critical, and usually hilarious. The author also posts his own professional reviews of New York opera productions, which are of a more serious nature. Readers participate frequently by commenting on blog posts, contributing knowledge, and linking to other resources. They are usually intelligent and knowledgeable, and often given to biting sarcasm. Most users comment under pseudonyms, but it is clear that they are authorities in the field. The discussions provide a valuable and entertaining insight into the unguarded opinions of opera buffs and experts.

Weekly updates of opera broadcasts on the Internet are advertised on *Operacast* (<http://www.operacast.com>). The site includes a list of Internet stations that broadcast

high-quality audio. *Operacast* also features a guide to opera recordings and videos for collectors.

Social context

Hersberger, Murray, and Rioux (2007) suggest that virtual communities, like face-to-face communities, are centered on a common interest and are based on human relationships. The underlying elements of virtual communities are membership, influence, integration, a shared emotional connection and the fulfillment of needs (p. 145). My observations as a participant in the opera enthusiast community reveal an online organization whose members meet across multiple platforms. As Bayn (2007) points out in her study of an online community of music fans, members move "amongst a complex ecosystem of sites, building connections amongst themselves and their sites as they do."

The opera enthusiast community "fosters social connectedness within the larger community" (Fisher & Durrance, 2003, p. 661). Members of the opera information network not only benefit from information providers, they also have an opportunity to contribute information. The possibilities of connecting to other like-minded individuals and offering and discovering new sources of pertinent information develop the sense of belonging to a select group of people with a common interest. Enthusiasm for, knowledge about, and expertise in opera are shared by relatively few and scattered individuals, and are often irrelevant in daily life. The online community of opera enthusiasts provides a platform where opinions, knowledge and information are shared and appreciated.

Regarding her participation in a forum, a music teacher who was interviewed stated, "Usually I just read the discussions and comments. Once in a while, if I know the answer

to somebody's question, I comment. It makes me feel good to know that my knowledge is needed and appreciated."

According to Fisher & Unruh (2007), virtual communities emphasize the importance of reciprocal relations and shared meanings. This idea is substantiated by Fulton's (2007) study of genealogists, in which information sharing is expected and valued. Online platforms utilized by the opera enthusiast community are developed and maintained as a result of emotional connections, communication, and the fulfillment of information needs. An opera enthusiast who often visits opera blogs and news sites comments, "I'm not sure I actually use this information in my job as a high school music teacher or in my daily life, but I feel that it keeps me connected." This statement suggests that the social connections offered by the community are as valuable as the practical information it provides.

The opera enthusiast information community "removes barriers to information..." (Fisher & Durrance, 2003, p. 661). Members of this community overcome language and geographical impediments by connecting through the Internet. An example that illustrates this aspect is the chat room on *Parterre*, which opens immediately following each Metropolitan Live in HD Broadcast. In the 2013-2014 season, "operas were transmitted via satellite into at least 2,000 theaters in 66 countries" ("Metropolitan Opera Live in HD," n.d.). Opera enthusiasts from all over the world watch these performances in local theaters, then go home and log on to *Parterre* to discuss their merits or deficiencies with other community members.

Ethical and legal issues

Opera enthusiasts often require sheet music for study, and to prepare for auditions

and performances. Based on the responses of an interview with an amateur opera singer, as well as the experience of the author as a participant of the community, this information need presents ethical and legal issues.

Although purchasing sheet music is reliable, legal, and easy, it is also expensive. Members sometimes take advantage of local libraries, which may contain a limited number of vocal scores. However, since musicians, conductors, directors and singers need to make notations in sheet music, they prefer photocopies to library scores. Community members express discomfort over copyright laws, unsure of their content and meaning, and of how they apply to copying sheet music. The same concern applies to downloading free scores from the Internet.

Copyright, therefore, poses a significant legal and ethical issue for the opera enthusiast information community. Intellectual freedom allows individuals to pursue ideas and interests without being scrutinized by others. It can be defined as “the right to freedom of thought, expression, and access to informative materials of any kind” (Krug 2003, 2010, p. 2820). However, this freedom must be balanced with the rights of authors to protect their intellectual property.

Online sharing of copyright protected material, such as images, recordings and videos, has become commonplace in the digital age. Sheet music is photocopied at libraries, and uploaded and shared on the Internet. But how do copyright restrictions apply to each of these situations?

Copyright laws, which are designed to protect the rights of authors of literary, dramatic, musical, artistic, and other intellectual works, are complex. Fair use allows copyright protected materials to be used for purposes such as criticism or commentary,

news reporting, teaching, scholarship or research (“Copyright,” n.d.).

Fair use is “a matter of interpretation” (Aulisio, p. 568). Judges are guided by four factors to resolve disputes: the purpose and character of use, the nature of the copyrighted work, the amount and substantiality of the portion taken, and the effect of the use upon the potential market (“Copyright,” n.d.). But courts are free to adapt these guidelines to each case. In determining which types of information sharing activities are infringing on copyright laws, are opera enthusiasts expected to be legal experts specializing in copyright?

Opera enthusiasts, many of whom are artists and authors themselves, walk a thin line between their desire to access and share information about the world of opera and their concern for the protection of intellectual property. “An ethical tension arises when the information needed is difficult or impossible to obtain efficiently without violating copyright restrictions” (Rubin & Froelich, 2010, p. 1746).

Individuals are left to be guided by their own morals in situations where intellectual freedom clashes with intellectual rights.

Resources and services

The resources and services available to opera enthusiasts vary in their ease and desirability of use. In evaluating these resources and services, it is crucial to consider the feelings of the user during the information seeking process. The user's perspective can often give insights into ways to promote better communication between the information system and its user (Kuhlthau, 1991).

Websites geared toward opera enthusiasts should take into account all aspects of user experience: visual design, interaction design, and information architecture (Schmidt,

2010). These elements could lead to a more satisfying user experience. For example, while *Opera Today* offers worthwhile information, the website suffers from a confusing sidebar containing many of the same entries as the main section. Category titles seem somewhat redundant and navigation is unclear.

Clarity over copyright restrictions is an area where opera enthusiasts could be better served. The anxiety experienced by group members over copyright highlights the dilemma pointed out by LaRue (2010) concerning librarian visibility. Librarians must ascertain whether to wait silently until patrons request assistance, until they intuitively ascertain that patrons are confused, or to intervene with explanations of copyright laws as soon as patrons approach the copy machine. Signs posted around the copy machines in libraries should give clear information about copyright restrictions. Perhaps libraries could benefit from the advice of Schmidt (2011), who recommends signs that are beautiful, easy to read, and meaningful.

In addition to copyright concerns, community members face other frustrations in obtaining sheet music. Opera enthusiasts often use online sources for free downloadable sheet music, which requires sorting through pages of irrelevant Google search results. Community members interviewed for this paper indicate that this process can be perplexing, exasperating, and unsuccessful. The reliability and correct transcription of some online sources are unclear. Opera enthusiasts would benefit from a coherent, centralized search system that yields reliable publications of sheet music.

There appears to be a lack of services for this community at a local level. Some public libraries provide a limited amount of relevant information, including tertiary sources, recordings, and scores. Specialized music libraries that contain extensive

materials for the opera community are not conveniently available to all enthusiasts.

Public libraries could provide support for members of the opera community by offering access to a wide selection of current video and audio opera recordings, as well as services to obtain reliable copies of opera scores. Libraries could also dedicate a section on their website to an opera blog. This blog could perhaps include weekly recommendations of opera recordings available at the library, along with a synopsis, translation, and the historical significance of the piece. Local events sponsored by libraries could foster interest and encourage participation in the opera community. Possible events could be lunchtime recitals, Metropolitan Opera Live in HD Broadcast meet-ups, or group DVD viewings with pre-curtain talks by experts.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the opera enthusiast information community fulfills the necessary qualities in order to be viewed in the context of serious leisure. The study of this community adds to the understanding of how individuals interact with information in their daily lives as they pursue serious leisure activities. Information needs of opera enthusiasts include audio and video recordings, sheet music, opera news and events, audition and employment notices, training programs, live broadcasts, and reviews. An examination of the information behaviors of members has revealed a preference for Internet resources. Interviews and participant-observations have highlighted the importance of the social context of this group's information activities. Ethical and legal concerns about copyright have been explored.

An assessment of resources and services that are available to this community has revealed a wide range of online information providers. Some online sources could be

better designed for a more satisfying user experience. Members would benefit from clarity about copyright restrictions. This would apply both to the use of online sources of downloadable sheet music, and to photocopies of library scores. Additionally, a centralized and comprehensive Internet search system yielding reliable and relevant sheet music would be helpful. Public libraries could improve their collections of audio and video opera recordings, provide services to obtain sheet music, and dedicate a section of their website to opera enthusiasts. They could also sponsor events aimed at connecting like-minded opera enthusiasts at a local level, as well as generating interest in this inspiring art form amongst other library patrons.

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