Information Hippies, Google-Fu Masters, and Other Volunteer Tourists in Thailand: Information Behaviour of ‘Culture-Shocked’ Individuals

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Problem

Based on a case study of the information behaviour (IB) of volunteers working on international development (ID) initiatives through two rural Thai non-governmental organizations (NGOs), this research explores what information English-language volunteers need, how they go about obtaining it, and strategies NGOs can employ to aid their volunteers. In particular, the effects of cultural confusion (more commonly referred to as “culture shock”), volunteer gender, and level of technological skill were the focus of this research. Numerous studies have shown that these factors relate significantly to information behaviour (Hughes 2005, Steinerová and J. Šušol 2007, Savolainen 2002).

Background

“Voluntourists” [those who “utilize discretionary time and income to go out of the regular sphere of activity to assist others in need” (McGhee & Santos 2005)] are a special group of travelers – neither professionally trained in ID nor average tourists because of their purpose for travel. Despite both the increase in international development projects and voluntourism opportunities, no IB studies have been conducted in either area, and little research has been conducted into this area at the ID NGO level. This study contributes to the development of information behaviour theory related to cultural confusion in hybrid third spaces, the transitional environments discussed in travel research that people experience when they are temporarily taken out of their normal environments.

Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews - 15 volunteers who held an ID placement for a minimum of one month were interviewed in late 2010. Volunteers came from Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States.

Participant Observation - Observation of participants took place at their placements, orientations, residences, and during their free time.

Interviews and observation were designed to explore the socially constructed identities that volunteers experience and the implications of this positioning on their information behaviour.

Theory

Theories from several different academic areas were utilized in this research. From tourism studies came the idea of “liminal states” (Selstad 2007) or “third-spaces” (Wilson & Richards 2008). In these spaces, travelers outside the package tourism crowd experience states of suspension between host and home cultures; individuals reevaluate their own culture and integrate new information.

To understand these suspended states, Social Positioning Theory (SPT) (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) is a useful lens to apply to the experience of volunteer tourists. SPT is used to examine social relations as they are taken up, assigned to, or challenged by individuals. In this study, social positioning theory is used to explore how volunteers shift their information behaviours based on the roles they experience in culturally confusing situations.

Findings

Normal home IB that relies heavily on Internet and personal connections was diminished abroad because of language, technical, and cultural differences.

Participants shifted between identifying themselves as tourists (i.e. outsiders) to Thai culture and locals (i.e. insiders) depending on the situation and the benefits. In general, this shifting of identities changed information behaviour; when stressing an insider identity participants relied heavily on a local broker (a local Thai person who spoke English and acted as a gatekeeper to local culture) for information. When stressing an outsider identity, they relied on other travelers and the Internet for information.

Travelers fell along a continuum, anchored by information hippies (those who purposely sought out no information in advance and/or “let the universe bring it to them” passively, often through in-person interaction) and Google-Fu masters (those who wanted every detail of their travels planned, relied heavily on the Internet, and were inexperienced travelers).

Travel experience and gender proved to be significant indicators of information behaviour and determinates of where participants fell on the continuum.

Obsession with information was specific to inexperienced female travelers, who felt a higher amount of risk associated with travel than others in the study. Attempting to calm this fear, they gathered as much information as possible about the situations in which they found themselves.

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