Escaping Information Poverty through Internet Newsgroups

Laura Hasler and Ian Ruthven
Outline

• Context
  - Information poverty, online support (and) groups
  - Our study and aims

• Data collection and coding for analysis

• Findings

• Conclusions
Information Poverty
(Chatman 1996)

- Unwillingness to ask others for info
- Social norms affect what info can be sought
- Mistrust of others’ ability/interest
- Perceived lack of info sources
- Self-protection: secrecy, deception
- Risk: benefits vs negative outcomes
Online support (and) groups

- Anonymity
- Large number of people from different places
- People in similar situations
- Information and emotional support
- Generally positive, accepting places
Our study

- Project: how information poverty manifests on the internet, via information sought and offered in news/discussion groups

- 3 research questions:
  - What information needs cause people to turn to the Internet?
  - Who are these information needs hidden from?
  - Why can these needs only be expressed online?

- Qualitative content analysis of 114 relevant posts from Usenet and other discussion groups, under 3 broad headings

- Overall contributions:
  - Gain insights into use of Internet groups as only source of help
  - Consider the theory of Information Poverty in a new setting
Data collection

• Posts from across Usenet and other discussion groups
• Google Groups: search groups and identify potential information poverty posts using key phrases
• Start with simple, explicit indicator of information poverty:
  - I cannot tell anyone
• Include semantic variants - other communication verbs, other (groups of) people:
  - I cannot talk to my parents, I cannot ask my doctor
• Include grammatical variants:
  - could never, will not, can’t, wont, wouldn’t, etc.
• Incorporate other relevant formulations/variations found
Data collection (2)

- Capture less explicit posts suggesting general lack of resources:
  - *don’t know where to turn; nowhere else to go*

- Ethical considerations - potentially sensitive topics, ‘private’ messages:
  - Posts from groups >100 members
  - Anonymization by removal or replacement with meta information: [NAME], [ORGANISATION], [GROUP], etc.

- Sample for diversity

- Current analysis based on 114 posts
Coding approach

Both theory-informed and grounded codes, starting by predefining 3 broad top-level codes for our 3 RQs:

**Topic-InfoNeed:**

*I tend to throw up my food after I eat a lot... I did where a size 14 now wear a size 10. I still think I am fat. I want to stop, but I don't know how... Please tell me what I can do... I know this is so bad for me but how can I stop???

**Hidden From:**

*I can’t tell anyone my secret; I cant tell my mom what I am doing

**Why Online:**

*i cant talk to my family cause I dont want them to feel disappointed with me again. i cant let them down again after the support they have given me over the last couple of years.*
Coding approach (2)

- Finer-grained sub-codes developed under each top-level code, based on the data
  - e.g. health resources, sexuality, friends, family, lack of understanding
- Themes/topics coded within each post
- Coding not restricted to specific syntactic units or number of instances
- 25 posts to initially develop coding approach
Findings: Topic

- Information and support sought on topics crucial to posters’ lives
- People hide needs that make them seem less able to cope than others (cf. Chatman 1996)
- Some topics are related to marginalised identities, often linked to Internet support
- Information sought to help self and others (family, friends)
- Needs expressed through self-disclosure/descriptions, specific requests and questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic-InfoNeed</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health-Condition</td>
<td>60 (52.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>25 (21.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal or illegal issues</td>
<td>6 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>6 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief-Death</td>
<td>6 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health-Resource</td>
<td>5 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance use/abuse</td>
<td>5 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>5 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>4 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>4 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>4 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Topic**

**Health-Condition** - wide range of mental/physical health issues; Different aspects: treatment, symptoms, medication, hiding behaviour, general coping

**Relationships** - issues with parents, partners, potential partners, friends; Relating to break ups, trust, divorce, finding friends/partner

**Legal or illegal issues** - social security, shoplifting custody/alimony: info needs on specific points of law, general reassurance.

**Grief-Death** - death of a loved one; feeling that something is wrong because they can’t get over it: *I feel so stupid, that I still feel this way 15 years later, but it doesn’t seem to get any better*

**Sexuality** - a need for general support/advice due to feeling lost: *I feel really alone and scared of who I think I might be... I don’t know what to do*
## Findings: Hidden From

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hidden-From</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
<th>Info needs hidden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>44 (38.6)</td>
<td>All topics; most often health conditions, relationships, grief-death, sexuality, abuse, pregnancy, sex, harassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>28 (24.6)</td>
<td>Health conditions, health resources, relationships, grief-death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone</td>
<td>23 (20.2)</td>
<td>Pregnancy, relationships, abuse, health conditions, sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>17 (14.9)</td>
<td>Substance use/abuse, grief-death, relationships, health conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Social care</td>
<td>15 (13.2)</td>
<td>Health conditions, substance use/abuse; also pregnancy, legal or illegal issues, relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>5 (4.2)</td>
<td>Pregnancy, substance use/abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>11 (9.6)</td>
<td>Legal or illegal issues, health conditions, substance use/abuse, grief-death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hidden From

**Partner** - information needs around support during pregnancy; poster’s own unacceptable views, partner unsupportive of emotional side

**Unspecified** - generic expressions of not knowing where to go for help with a particular issue; posters do not seem to have any sources of support at all:

*I just don’t know where to turn now. Sometimes I think that maybe it would be better just to leave this earth!*

- Posters often hide information needs from those closest to them and will not approach ‘outsiders’ (cf. Chatman 1996)
- Posters may not mention all sources, but mentioning the ones they do may suggest these are potentially the most useful
Findings: Why Online

Related to **information poverty**:
- Perceived lack of sources
- Hiding needs due to potential negative consequences (risk)
- Mistrust of others’ ability to give useful/relevant information
- Not an absolute situation → spectrum (selected new info)

Related to **online support**:
- Seeking others in similar situations
- **But** embarrassment, anonymity not often specified as reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why-Online</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of understanding or support</td>
<td>36 (31.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know where else to go</td>
<td>32 (28.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking similar experiences</td>
<td>23 (20.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other sources unhelpful/exhausted</td>
<td>21 (18.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reaction</td>
<td>20 (17.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effect</td>
<td>20 (17.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional source</td>
<td>18 (15.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate step</td>
<td>13 (11.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>11 (9.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why Online

Lack of understanding or support - a perceived or actual lack of support:

_Cant talk to my mum coz she'll just say Im being a drama queen, She doesn't understand_ (health condition)

Don’t know where else to go - most common with unspecified sources (almost all):

_I am totally new to this. I've never posted anything. But..I don't know where to turn_ (legal or illegal issues)

Seeking similar experiences - linked to Lack of understanding/support (almost 1/2):

_My fiancee says I can talk to him about it, but he has never been in the situation...so he really cannot be there totally_ (abuse)
Why Online

**Other sources unhelpful/exhausted** - sources tried in past and no longer any use:

> ive called the police and they won't do anything because he doesn't abuse me (relationships, substance use and abuse)

**Negative reaction of others** - disappointment, causing fights, ruining relationships, often a more ‘physical’ reaction:

> I cant tell anybody that cos... I will be locked up again in a mental place (health condition)

**Negative effect on others** - to protect others rather than themselves:

> I cannot talk to my wife, she has major post partum depression to deal with (substance use and abuse)
Why Online

Additional source - other sources (health/social care profs, friends, partners) are effective, but posters still feel the need to talk in the newsgroup; suggests a spectrum of information poverty:

Friends can only do so much. Then at night. They go home. And again I’m left with emptiness (relationships)

Intermediate step - group used to find information on how to talk to others, usually health/social care professionals, parents, friends:

i would just like to talk to someone, group, counsellor etc, i just dont know where to start (grief/death)

Unspecified

I read how you and other people always say "tell your friends, parents, counsulors at school" but I CANT I just cant, please trust me on this one I cant tell anybody, please, believe me (health condition)
Conclusions

- Newsgroups and discussion groups do provide a means of expression for those who feel they have no local support available.
- Gained insights into how and why people use these groups for issues crucial to their everyday lives.
- Findings so far:
  - Topics/info needs: health conditions, relationships
  - Hidden from: parents, family, ‘everyone’
  - Why online: lack of support or understanding, don’t know where else to go
- Provides support for most aspects of information poverty in a new setting and relates to other work on online support groups.
Thank you

Questions?