
Vulnerable Communities in the Digital Age: Advancing Research and Exploring Collaborations

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Abstract

The intersection between digital information worlds and vulnerable communities within our societies is a critical area of research and practice within the iSchools movement, because there have been concerns about issues regarding bias, social exclusion, cyber-racism, cyberbullying, misinformation, and other information sharing hazards in the information experience of vulnerable communities. We seek to bring together a community of researchers and information professionals researching in this important area of our society. We will cover research across disciplinary borders, explore new opportunities for collaboration, and lay the groundwork for a journal special issue centered on vulnerable groups. The iSchools community provides an excellent place to discuss this crucial topic at the intersection of information, society, and technology.

Keywords: vulnerable communities; marginalised groups; disadvantaged groups; digital media; collaboration; information behaviour

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1 Purpose and Intended Audience

Digital media and information technologies have a radical impact on vulnerable people's everyday lives including searching for and using valuable information. There have been concerns about issues around bias, social exclusion, misinformation and information sharing hazards. Understanding information behaviours of vulnerable communities and its evolution in the digital age is a critical area of research and practice within the iSchools movement. The iSchools community provides an excellent place to discuss this crucial topic at the intersection of information, society, and technology.

According to Aday (1994), vulnerable communities are defined as being at risk of poor physical, psychological, or social health; to be vulnerable is to be in a position of being hurt or ignored, as well as helped, by others. Vulnerable people typically include women and children, ethnic people of color, immigrants, gay men and lesbians [currently people from LBGTQI populations], the homeless, and the elderly (Flaskerud, 1998).

Research has been conducted for marginalised and vulnerable communities (Chatman, 1999; Du et al., 2015; Westbrook, 2008; Xie et al., 2014). For example, Chatman (1999) conducted an ethnographic research and interviewed 80 women prison inmates and examined how they redefined their information (social) world to survive incarceration. Fisher et al. (2004) investigated information habits and information grounds of migrant Hispanic farm workers in central Washington in the United States. Lilley (2008) examined information barriers encountered by Māori secondary school students when they seek information. Westbrook (2008) explored everyday life information needs of intimate partner violence survivors and found that they demanded community information resources in workforce, health care, public housing, criminal justice, and social services. More recently, Xie et al. (2014) identified types of help-seeking situations unique to blind users at the cognitive level when they search information in digital libraries. Du et al. (2015) investigated the use of information technologies for everyday information and communication needs by indigenous people in a community in South Australia. Khoir et al. (2015) examined everyday information behaviours of Asian immigrants in Australia and how these relate to their settlement experiences. Garner's study is a phenomenological approach to the information experience of prisoners with respect to prison libraries including their access to digital information (Garner, 2015). The study of Fransen-Taylor and Narayan (2016) shows that digital social media is now a key resource for the homeless, specifically homeless youth, who now constitute 48% of the homeless population in most Westernised countries.

All of the above research approaches show that we need a strong and coherent research agenda on vulnerable communities and their access to and use of information in the digital age. With this workshop, we seek to bring together a community of researchers and information professionals interested in advancing this area. We seek to develop research ideas across disciplinary boundaries, explore new opportunities for collaboration, and lay the groundwork for a journal special issue centered on vulnerable communities in regard to their information needs and information use.

2 Proposed Format

This workshop will involve a variety of presentations and discussions that facilitate an understanding of vulnerable groups' information behaviour and associated issues in the digital age.

The workshop consists of two sessions; each session features a keynote (invited presentation), short presentation(s), and a breakout discussion moderated by the organisers. At the end of two sessions, there is a panel discussion with all speakers.

Professor Iris Xie and Associate Professor Lynn Westbrook are invited keynote speakers who will focus on the challenges, opportunities and new ways of conducting multidisciplinary research on vulnerable communities, stating their perspectives on the current status.

The workshop co-organisers Dr Tina Du, Dr Bhuva Narayan, and Dr Elham Sayyad Abdi will give short presentations, whose talks focus on their research with various vulnerable groups including indigenous communities, homeless youth, and migrants and refugees.

Small breakout discussion groups will be organised around themes emerging from the solicited position papers (see 2.2 call for position papers).

The panel discussion aims to explore some of the important issues facing vulnerable communities research in the digital age. All speakers will sit in the panel and provide their insights. The workshop will close with a discussion of next steps and potential future collaborations.

2.1 Draft schedule

9:00-9:10am	Welcome and introduction
Session 1	
9:10-9:40 am	Invited presentation no.1 (30m)
9:40-10:10 am	2 Short presentations (15m per talk)
10:10-10:40 am	First breakout discussion
10:40-10:50am	break
Session 2	
10:50-11:20am	Invited presentation no. 2 (30m)
11.20-11.35am	1 Short presentation (15m)
11.35am-12.05pm	Second breakout discussion
12.05-12.20pm	Panel discussion with all speakers
12:20-12:30pm	Wrap-up and next steps

Table 1. Draft Schedule

2.2 Call for position papers

We aim to run an interactive workshop to enable the fullest exchange of ideas amongst attendees. For this reason, the expectation is that participants will come prepared. To that end, we invite researchers, graduate students, and practitioners to submit a short position paper (no more than 500 words) in which they outline the topic and themes they would like to discuss. The position papers should be sent to tina.du@unisa.edu.au before 23 January 2017.

Prior to the workshop, we will use these position papers to organise small groups (with each group led by a workshop co-organiser).

Welcome topics include but are not limited to:

- Vulnerable communities' experience of information technologies
- Big data and vulnerable communities
- Digital libraries and vulnerable users
- Everyday Life Information of older adults
- Information experience of migrants and refugees
- Information service model for minority

- Information behavior of indigenous people
- Homeless population, especially homeless youth
- People with disabilities
- Approaches or methods to study vulnerable groups
- Ethical challenges of studying vulnerable population

3 Goals or Outcomes

We expect the workshop will generate new insights within our community about vulnerable populations. In the discussion, we will encourage these insights be turned into future objects of study by workshop members by producing and sharing documentation of the workshop as well as a contact list of attendees.

4 Relevance to the iConference

Investigations of the vulnerable communities in the digital age are a growing part of the iSchool community. This workshop will provide a chance to gather like-minded researchers together to pursue a new theme in this area, namely the intersection between digital information worlds and vulnerable communities. The interactive workshop format will enable exploration and discussion, embodying the creative ideas of the topic.

5 Duration:

This workshop will be a half-day event.

6 Expected/Preferred Number of Participants

We expect about 25 participants, and would prefer to limit participation to 30 participants to ensure we have a cohesive group with plenty of chances for interaction.

7 References

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