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The Utilitarian and Hedonic Outcomes of Music Information-Seeking in Everyday Life:

A Critique

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Abstract

LaPlante and Downie offer a convincing argument for including hedonic factors when creating and judging music information retrieval systems. The findings can be applied to wider areas of information searching.

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The Utilitarian and Hedonic Outcomes of Music Information-Seeking in Everyday Life:

A Critique

In *The Utilitarian and Hedonic Outcomes of Music Information-Seeking in Everyday Life*, Laplante and Downie (2011) present a convincing argument for expanding the definition of success when using a music information-retrieval system (MIR). An MIR can be traditional—a visit to a record store or reading a magazine—or non-traditional, such as web-based services like Rhapsody and Pandora. They find that, while finding new music to listen to is gratifying, finding information about music and the very search process itself can satisfy.

Research gaps and foundation

Laplante and Downie point out that most previous research on information-seeking has been oriented on specific tasks. Matching a specific answer to a specific query is not the same thing as browsing the new CDs in a store. Studying transaction logs gives one some idea of what a person is looking for but not the context or level of satisfaction. This study incorporates searching for pleasure as well as specific needs.

The study builds on Wilson's 1996 model of information-seeking behavior: circular process where the context in which a person seeks information determines their behavior during the search (Wilson & Walsh, section 7-1). The results of the search, the outcomes, add to the context of the information, thus changing their behavior. Laplante and Downie expand the

outcomes to include copious previous research on shopping behavior: window shopping can be as satisfying as making a purchase.

Procedure

The sample pool ended up being an admittedly narrow spectrum of young, French-speaking, highly educated, “avid music listeners” (n=15). Because they wanted to study the behavior of intense musical searches, the demographic makes sense for an exploratory study. Their techniques of maximum variation sampling and constant comparative analysis seem to have ensured the widest perspective possible from a narrow pool.

Findings

Participants reported gaining satisfaction from three possible sources: finding new music to listen to, finding information *about* music, and enjoying the searching process itself.

The study did not follow participants actually searching for music. Instead, they asked them what kinds of music they liked, how they found music, and what made them feel satisfied. They were of course happy when they found new music to listen to. Finding information about music was just as satisfying. Musical knowledge is a social commodity, used to reflect our own values and judge our commonality with others. In addition, even if a search does not result in immediate acquisition, participants reported saving information for future purchases, either for themselves or to recommend to others. In fact, a search with no results is not the same as an unsatisfactory one. Participants reported equal satisfaction from the search itself. This seems to fit in with Borgman’s description of the natural iterative searching process (1996).

Implications for music retrieval and the larger information world

Laplante and Downie identify three areas of music retrieval systems that can be improved to offer more user satisfaction. The findings can apply to many information environments. Faceted navigation allows a user to browse a music collection without entering a specific query. Thinking about libraries in particular, the findings support offering a faceted interface to online catalogs, such as those in discovery layers like Aquabrowser, and corroborate Pratt, Hearst, and Fagan, L.M. (as cited in Fagan, J.C., 2010) on higher satisfaction from faceted browsing than with either ranked or clustered results. MIRs and online catalogs alike should offer more information for search results: recommendations, related works, biographies—all of these can link to other works. Laplante and Downie focus especially on increasing engagement: the length and intensity of user interaction. Some people scoff at the idea that libraries should be more like bookstores and cafes, but this study supports the effort.

Unanswered questions and further research

I think Laplante and Downie's study makes sense as an initial, exploratory, stab at understanding information-seeking for pleasure. They did not delve deeply into the behavioral differences between traditional and non-traditional MIRs nor the pleasure gained from music that is free or "free" compared to paid for. Because they didn't study users actually searching for music, it is difficult to tell if participants reported their reality or only their perception of how they use MIRs.

If I were to expand on this study, I would study participants actually searching for music. I would use a think-aloud protocol to record their thoughts and activities as they search. If I were

focusing on libraries, I would want to know how to provide more instant gratification to users of the online catalog. How can libraries increase user engagement while users wait for books and other limited resources? Additionally, I would expand the age range and education level of the study.

References

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