

Chapter 2

Informed Democracy: Information Experiences during the 2012 Queensland Election

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the preliminary findings of a qualitative study exploring people's information experiences during the 2012 Queensland State election in Australia. Six residents of South East Queensland who were eligible to vote in the state election participated in a semi-structured interview. The interviews revealed five themes that depict participants' information experience during the election: information sources, information flow, personal politics, party politics, and sense making. Together these themes represent what is experienced as information, how information is experienced, as well as contextual aspects that were unique to voting in an election. The study outlined here is one in an emerging area of enquiry that has explored information experience as a research object. This study has revealed that people's information experiences are rich, complex, and dynamic, and that information experience as a construct of scholarly inquiry provides deep insights into the ways in which people relate to their information worlds. More studies exploring information experience within different contexts are needed to help develop our theoretical understanding of this important and emerging construct.

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INTRODUCTION

Enrolling to vote and voting is compulsory for every Australian citizen over 18 years. In March 2013, 91.2% of eligible Australians were enrolled to vote (Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), 2013). Since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924, the turnout at Australian elections has never fallen below 90% (Evans, 2006). The AEC (n.d., p. 2) notes that “citizens have the right and the responsibility to enrol and vote” because “voting in elections is a powerful way for citizens to have a say in the decision-making which affects their lives.” Whilst a body of literature has begun to explore people’s voting activities from the perspective of communication studies (Chen, 2008), human information behavior (Moody, 2011), psychology (Kam & Utych, 2011) and new media (Burns & Burgess, 2010), very little research has investigated this event from the perspective of people’s information experience. Information experience has recently become a construct of interest within library and information research (Bruce, Partridge, Hughes, & Davis, in press). Studies exploring information experience direct attention to aspects such as what is experienced as information, how information is experienced, the outcome of the information experience, and the broader context in which the experience occurs. Information experience research allows a broad understanding and interpretation of people’s engagement and interaction with their information environment (Bruce & Partridge, 2011). The focus on experience takes into account the interrelations between people and their broader environments in a manner which considers people and their world as inseparable. The research presented in this chapter fills this gap by investigating people’s information experiences during the 2012 Queensland state election. The chapter first provides the background to the study, by introducing existing literature that has explored how people engage with information as part of voting activities. Next the chapter outlines the current study, providing details of

the method, the participants, data collection and analysis as well as presenting the study’s findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the research outcomes relate to current literature, the study’s practical and theoretical implications, and suggests some possible directions for future research.

BACKGROUND

It has been argued that without a basic understanding of differences in policy between candidates and parties “the public will be unable to cast its ballots wisely and, hence, unable to hold elected leaders accountable for their actions” (Craig, Kane, & Gainous, 2005, p. 483). Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak (2005, p. 428) echo this sentiment stating that “knowledge of such information is important for citizens to make informed decisions.” How then do voters select, gather and use political information that is available to them? There has been a plethora of research in the political arena, giving some insight into the information sources used by citizens to inform their voting decisions, and factors that affect certain aspects of voting such as perceived knowledge, political self efficacy and commitment to vote. This section will briefly review some of the findings of research that has been undertaken in this field.

Much has been uncovered about the sources that citizens report using to gather information to inform their vote. For example, Lusoli (2005) reported that 78% of Europeans surveyed reported receiving election information from television or radio broadcasts, 60% read newspaper articles, and 46% discussed political issues with family and friends. Norris and Curtice (2007) found similar results for British citizens: 51% used television or radio broadcasts for their political information gathering, 47% read the newspaper, and 46% discussed the election with friends and family. While conducting focus group interviews with college students in the United States, Wells and

Dudash (2007) discovered that discussions with family and friends was mentioned by 28.5% of participants, while 22% watched/listened to television and radio programs, 10% read newspapers, and 15% reported using the Internet for seeking political information.

A large body of research has concentrated on the popularity of the Internet in voter's information seeking behaviour. A telephone survey administered to 84,186 American adults found that about one in three participants reported going online for news and information about the 2000 presidential election (Farnsworth & Owen, 2003). However, Internet use may be lower in other countries. A European survey found that only 8% of participants used the Internet to find European Parliament election information, with wide variations reported across national boundaries (Lusoli, 2005). A more recent British study uncovered that 12% of voters surveyed used the Internet for election information (Norris & Curtice, 2007). Gender and age differences in the use of the Internet for political information seeking have also been reported. For example, in a European survey males were more likely to use the Internet for political information than females (Lusoli, 2005). Additionally, older individuals (aged 55 and above) were less likely to use the Internet (Lusoli, 2005), while in another study younger people were more likely than older people to use digital sources to find information about political parties and elections (Norris & Curtice, 2007).

The most popular uses of the Internet for election purposes have been reported to be information seeking, searching for information on political issues (69%), and expressing opinions in online polls (35%; Farnsworth & Owen, 2003). Recognising the prevalence of using the Internet to search for information on particular issues, to what extent do individuals find this information easy to locate, use and understand? A Scottish study found that 96.9% of citizens surveyed reported finding campaign Websites either "very" or "quite" easy to use (Baxter, Marcella, Chapman, & Fraser, 2013).

When Farnsworth and Owen (2003) surveyed American adults, 43% of respondents reported finding information on the Internet that made them want to vote for or against a particular candidate. This finding indicated that citizens not only use the Internet to gather information about particular candidates or parties, but that they also may use this information to inform their voting decision.

While examining Internet searching behaviours, Robertson, Wania, and Joon Park (2007) revealed that participants executed only a small number of simple search queries – generally searching for only a candidate name or a candidate name and an issue. These participants preferred to browse using links between Webpages. In a follow up study the researchers discovered that giving participants the opportunity to take notes while searching reduced the extent and thoroughness of searching and browsing, but that it seemed to increase evaluative thought and reflection (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Abraham, 2009). In an Australian survey study O' Cass and Pecotich (2005) discovered that subjective knowledge and information had a strong effect on voter's confidence in their political choices whereby individuals who reported being more politically informed were more confident that they had voted for the "right" candidate. A study of 535 American adults interviewed by telephone found that high information seekers tended to be more knowledgeable about politics (e.g., recognition of candidates) than low information seekers (Kitchens, Powell, & Williams, 2003). However, high information seekers were no more likely to form opinions on issues or to make a voting decision. Thus, the relationship between information seeking, political knowledge and opinion formation/political choice appears to be complex.

Kaid (2002; 2003) ran a series of experiments where participants were exposed to the same information on one of two US presidential candidates (Al Gore and George W. Bush) via different medium (television or Internet) and either had the opportunity to seek additional information

immediately via the Internet (Internet condition) or did not have this opportunity (television condition). In both studies participants who viewed information online and were given the chance to view more information were more likely to seek additional information, such as watching more advertisements and TV news, reading additional newspaper articles, discussing the election with friends and visiting candidate's Websites. These individuals also reported being more likely to vote in a future election. Interestingly, it was found that the format of the information medium appeared to affect the individual's voting choice. Participants who were exposed to messages on the Internet evaluated both presidential candidates more favourably in post-test measures, than those who were exposed through television. Furthermore, participants who viewed a televised political debate were more likely to vote for Gore than for Bush, while those who viewed the same debate on the Internet were more likely to vote for Bush than Gore. These series of experiments indicated that the Internet is an important information seeking tool for voters, but that some political candidates may be better received through traditional media.

In another traditional (television) versus Internet media study, Valentino, Hutchings, and Williams (2004) presented participants with a televised political advertisement and then tracked their online information search. They uncovered several interesting results. Individuals who viewed the advertisement exhibited greater accuracy of details they could recall about political candidates than participants who viewed no advertisements, indicating that television advertisements either contained useful information, or enabled participants to more easily recall information. However, watching the television advertisement was also linked with viewing fewer Webpages regarding political issues in the subsequent Internet search. Hence it is possible that participants considered the advertisement went some way to fulfilling their political information needs. Finally, research findings discovered an interesting trend amongst

the least politically aware. Here, television advertisements were found to affect these participants' voting preference: Bush advertisements pushed them towards voting for Bush, while Gore advertisements made them more likely to vote for Gore.

Research has also explored the effects of attitudes and emotions on voting behavior, with studies showing that citizens may be more inclined to pay attention to political messages that are in line with their beliefs and attitudes. Knobloch-Westerwick, and Meng (2009) found that participants spent 36% more time looking at attitude-consistent newspaper articles than on counterattitudinal content. Valentino, Hutchings, Banks and Davis (2008) randomly assigned 408 US citizens to conditions that were designed to induce specific emotional states (angry/afraid/enthusiastic) and gave participants the opportunity to visit candidate Websites. The researchers found that anger significantly reduced the amount of time participants spent seeking political information, although anxiety and enthusiasm did not. Moreover, anxious, angry and enthusiastic citizens claimed that they were more interested in the presidential campaign than did participants in the control (no emotion) group. In a follow-up study, Valentino and his colleagues found that anger powerfully motivated political participation (Valentino, Brader, Groenedyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011). These findings have implications, for example for candidate and party use of political advertisements that arouse emotions, particularly anger.

While there has been a reasonable body of research devoted to understanding voter's information behaviours during elections, most of this research has been conducted in the US, with very little research from Europe (e.g., Lusoli, 2005), Great Britain (e.g., Baxter et al., 2013; Norris & Curtice, 2007) and Australia (e.g., O'Cass & Pecotich, 2005). Moreover, research has largely encompassed survey research (e.g., Farnsworth & Owen, 2003; Kitchens et al., 2003; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Lusoli, 2005; Norris & Curtice,

2007; O’Cass & Pecotich, 2005) or experimental studies that manipulated one or two variables (usually either political advertising message medium or access to the Internet for information seeking) in a laboratory setting (e.g., Kaid, 2002, 2003; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Valentino et al., 2004, 2008). Researchers have used a variety of theories to examine political issues, including advertising (Valentino et al., 2004, 2008), consumer behaviour (O’Cass & Pecotich, 2005), one-step and two-step communication flows (Norris & Curtice, 2007), media dependency (Fox, Koloen, & Sahin, 2007) and cognitive dissonance (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). Despite the breadth of research exploring political information seeking and voting behaviour, very little research has investigated this concept from the perspective of people’s information experience. The present study fills this void by investigating Australian citizens’ information experiences during the 2012 Queensland State election, through in-depth individual interviews of a small sample of voters.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Aim

The aim of the research project was to explore people’s information experiences during the 2012 Queensland state election.

Theoretical Framework

Information experience is a research concept that can be considered at two separate but inter-related levels of understanding: (i) as a research domain and (ii) as a research object. As a research domain, investigating information experience allows a broad understanding and interpretation of people’s engagement and interaction with their information environment (Bruce & Partridge, 2011). The focus on experience takes

into account the interrelations between people and their broader environments in a manner which considers people and their world as inseparable, and has been posited as an alternative research domain to information behaviour (Bruce, Partridge, Hughes, & Davis, in press). Information experience can also be a research object, sitting alongside other information research objects such as information practice, information literacy, information seeking and information sharing. Studies exploring information experience as a research object direct attention to aspects such as what is experienced as information, how information is experienced, the outcome of the information experience as well as the broader context in which the experience occurs. Researching information experience involves gaining access to, understanding and analyzing the richness and complexities of a person’s information world, and not just people’s information skills and behaviours. There are many different qualitative methods, with different ways of understanding experience that can be applied when choosing to adopt an information experience lens, such as grounded theory, critical incident technique and phenomenography. Both levels of the information experience research concept have informed this research. Over the years a number of studies have been undertaken within the information experience research domain and/or have adopted an information experience research lens (see Bruce, 1997; Lupton, 2008; Lloyd, 2007). However the study outlined here is one of a few studies that has explored information experience as a research object. Consequently, this research provides new insight into this second level of understanding.

Approach

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Kvale (2007) describes interviews as “a conversation that has structure and a purpose determined by the one party – the interviewer” (p. 7). Through this conversation, the interviewer has

a “unique opportunity to uncover rich and complex information” (Cavava, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001, p. 138). Interviews allow research participants to tell their own story in their own words. Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that an interview is “a great adventure...it brings new information and opens new windows into the experiences of the people you meet” (p. 1). Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate choice for this study because of their suitability in obtaining information about people’s views, opinions, ideas and experiences (Arskey & Knight, 1999). The semi-structured interview “is a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meaning of the subject’s everyday world” (Kvale, 2007, p. 11). Semi-structured interviews, however, have both advantages and disadvantages. Whilst they provide an invaluable insight into people’s everyday lives they can potentially be limited by the small number of respondents that participate, the limitations on generalisability to a larger population and the bias of the interviewers’ influence and interests. Every effort was made to strengthen the advantages and to limit the disadvantages of the semi-structured interview approach used in this study.

Participants

Six people participated in the study. All were eligible to vote in the 2012 Queensland state election. A combined convenience and purpose sampling approach was selected as the most effective option for recruiting study participants. The researchers drew upon their personal and professional networks, as well as via recruitment messages posted on Twitter and Facebook. Participant ages ranged from 24 to 54 years, with an average age of 33.16. There was an even mix of gender with 3 males and 3 females. All were employed, roles held included librarian, IT professional, administration manager, and project officer. All participants had university qualifications, three held an undergraduate degree, one had an honours qualification and one had graduated from a coursework masters. Information

on the participant’s political preferences or their intended voting behavior was not gathered. As part of the recruitment process participants were advised that the focus of the research was not on exploring their personal political views. Instead the study was focused on exploring how they used information to be informed during the election.

Data Collection

To capture the ‘full’ information experience of voting in an election data collection took place before, during and after the election. Consequently, interviews were held during March and April 2012, while the Queensland state election took place on Saturday March 24. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio recorded. There was no predetermined length for the interviews and participants were free to continue talking for as long as they wished. On average interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. One member of the research team conducted all the interviews, and this helped to reduce interviewer bias and to limit variation in interview technique.

One of the first challenges in developing the data collection instrument for the current approach was in deciding how best to introduce what the interview was ‘about’ without unduly influencing or confusing the participants. ‘Information experience’ is a term that potentially very few participants would be familiar with in that it is not a term used in popular discourse, indeed it has only become a concept of discourse in the mainstream library and information science literature within the last few years. A decision was made to not use the phrase “information experience.” Instead phrases such as “staying informed” and “keeping current” were employed. The authors acknowledge that these phrases are not synonymous with ‘information experience’; however, it was crucial to find a clear way to communicate the topic so that ‘everyday’ people who were taking part in the study could engage with it.

The general aim in the interviews was to see through the participant's eyes by having them explain their experiences. The interview was divided into three parts. The first part involved what Kvale (2007) calls the 'briefing' (p. 55). It involved the interviewer introducing themselves, describing the interview process and establishing a basic profile of the interviewee. Kvale (2007) notes that the briefing is an extremely important part of the interview as it sets the interview stage and helps encourage the interviewee to feel relaxed enough to talk freely. Importantly for the current interviews, it was during this part of the interview process that the participants were reminded that the focus of the interviews was on their lived experiences of being informed, or trying to be informed during the Queensland state election, and not on their personal political views. The second part of the interview was aimed at orientating the participants to the concept being examined. The following open-ended questions were used to stimulate discussion:

- How have you been keeping up to date or staying informed during the election?
- What have you found most challenging about keeping up to date or staying informed?
- What sources have you preferred to keep up to date?

Unstructured follow up probes were used to further explore points as they emerged during the interview. The semi-structured interview, perhaps more than any other type of interview, depends upon the rapport established between the interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2007). The skill and ability of the interviewer is therefore very important in establishing a quality interview. To ensure this was achieved, the interviewer followed the advice of Kvale (2007). The interviewer was sensitive to the respondent and listened actively to the content of what was said, and the many nuances of meaning in an answer. The interviewer was open and willing to hear which aspects of

the interview topic were important to the interviewee, and followed new aspects when they were introduced by an interviewee. The third and final part of the interview was the "debriefing" (Kvale, 2007). This is when the interviewer thanked the respondent for their involvement and answered any questions they may have had with respect to the research project.

At the conclusion of the first two interviews, the research team collectively reviewed the text transcripts that were produced to consider whether amendments or refinements were necessary to the schedule of interview questions. In addition the research team also reviewed the transcripts to identify instances where probe questions could have been used to elicit further information from research participants. This purpose of this process was to jointly refine the research team's understanding of the object of study, and to identify points of interest in the interviews that had emerged, and were worthy of probing if they appeared in subsequent interviews.

Analysis

Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran (2001) noted that thematic analysis is undertaken to "identify the underlying themes, insights and relationship within the phenomenon being researched" (p. 69). Qualitative analysis is not just about "counting or providing numeric summaries," instead its purpose is to "discover variation, portray shades of meaning and examine complexity" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 202). The data analysis process undertaken in the current study was an iterative one, constantly grounded in the interview data. The authors spent time listening to the audio recordings and reviewing the transcripts, with the aim of identifying the emerging themes and to determine the similarities, differences and potential connections among keywords, phrases and concepts within and among each interview. In addition, analysis considered the concepts and themes indirectly revealed. Rubin and Rubin

(1995) noted that “you may discover themes by looking at the tension between what people say and the emotion they express” (p. 210).

The research team collectively analysed two transcripts to develop a common list of terms and phrases that could be attributed to emerging themes. This helped to ensure that there was consistency in the research team’s understanding of the object of study (i.e. information experience), and in the way that data analysis of the remaining transcripts was approached. Researcher A coded the remaining four interviews, using the list of terms and phrases that had been developed as a group, adding new terms as necessary. Researchers B and C then reviewed the coding of these four interviews and final coding consensus was reached through discussion, in the case of any disagreements about codes assigned. Following the coding, two members of the research team analysed the six transcripts thematically. Five themes were revealed and were then presented to the third member of the research team for scrutiny and to ascertain communicability. Once again, group discussion allowed final intercoder agreement to be reached as to which themes were represented in each interview.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the data revealed five key themes that depict participants’ information experience during the 2012 Queensland State election. It should be emphasised that these findings are preliminary in nature, and changes to the themes presented may occur as further research is conducted. The five themes uncovered as part of this research were as follows:

- Information sources
- Information flow
- Personal politics
- Party politics
- Sense making

The following section briefly outlines the five themes. Illustrative quotes obtained from the interviews are also included to support research findings.

INFORMATION SOURCES

The information sources theme reveals the ‘what’ of the person’s information experience; it describes what is experienced as information. The research participants used a broad range of information sources during the election, including television, radio, newspapers, leaflets, signs, Websites, Internet search engines and social media such as Twitter and Facebook. One participant noted that with so many information sources to draw upon “*it’s so easy to be politically informed*” [Participant 1, p. 4].

The participants however, also acknowledged that available information sources varied considerably in quality, as illustrated by the following quotations:

I think we got them [flyers in the mail] from the Labor Party and the Liberal Party. I really didn’t look at it very much because I find that usually when I get those sort of things there’s nothing very substantial in them so I don’t really pay a lot of attention to them cause its usually ‘vote for us’... [Participant 3, p. 2]

You get second hand stuff from the news media and stuff like that but if you go directly to the political parties websites actually it’s spelled out. [Participant 1, p. 2]

The challenges in finding accurate and reliable information were noted by one participant:

It’s hard to dig out what’s the actual truth or what has spin. Not to say it’s lies necessarily but the spin on it, or the way to indirectly move your mind or thinking when its like a half truth or like

trying to convince you of something by dangling a carrot, or whatever it is, it's just frustrating. [Participant 5, p. 3]

Consequently, participants indicated that they had their preferred sources or channels for obtaining information during the election:

I think I probably more align myself with the ABC's coverage cause it seems to be a bit more realistic, complete picture rather than a bit of less bias. [Participant 1, p. 1]

[Twitter] is just opinions...but for for real information I'll just abc.net.au and the radio, 612. [Participant 4, p. 1]

Participants noted the benefits of online technologies, especially social media, as an information source:

Twitter I quite like cause I've got it on my phone so if I'm on the train or I'm bored I can just go through and click on articles that interest me. [Participant 6, pp. 1 and 2]

The immediacy of information these days is good and it's so... you know media its really controlled in some ways, but I think everybody has a lot more options now in terms of finding, and being politically informed, because you can get so many differing opinions so easily over the internet. So you don't need to just rely on the Courier Mail, or the Sydney Morning Herald, or a news channel, you can get so many different ideas...and through social media and stuff as well...even though for me it's maybe just the odd thing on Facebook, other people might find themselves plugging in a lot more, like because even politicians have Twitter feeds and stuff like that these days too. [Participant 1, p. 4]

Information Flow

The information flow theme reveals the 'how' of the person's information experience; it describes how information is experienced. The research participants experienced a flow of information during the election, where information was experienced in both a 'push' and 'pull' manner, as illustrated by the following quotations:

I would visit my friend who lives in Ashgrove, just going to her place as opposed to where I live in Clayfield we hardly got any [flyers] But I just go to her place and everything was just flyers. They're not particularly political but it's just everywhere because they were getting bombarded so much. [Participant 4, p. 2]

If I'm interested in their policies I will actually go and look on their website. [Participant 1, p. 2]

Several participants noted the negative experiences of having information 'pushed' during the election:

We got some leaflet in the mail and they did quite offend me..it was really offensive and it was kind of like 'thanks very much.' That was a real turn off. I think I actually really was 'can we just put that in the bin now.' [Participant 6, p. 4]

The most challenging things I find is getting the spam from political parties in the mail ... its like you're being forced, they're giving... it's like its advertising basically. So I find that really irritating and I find it quite challenging because it annoys me I'd be quite alarmed if I went to one of the sites where I go and find information and had a popup from a political party. So I don't particularly like that entering my house. [Participant 1, p. 2]

Well I've usually made up my mind but to be polite and also because they shove it in your face I take leaflets off everyone. [Participant 2, p. 5]

One participant noted that they preferred to “find the information myself” [Participant 1] while another acknowledged that their information flow, or the way they engaged with political information, changed during an election:

I don't normally, in a non election period, I don't normally go and seek out information about politics and what's happening but, election time, yes I do actively seek out information... to help me make a decision. [Participant 2, p. 5]

Personal Politics

The personal politics theme reveals the ‘context’ of the person’s information experience; it highlights aspects of the information experience that are unique to voting in an election. The personal political preferences of the participants in the research were a core part of their information experiences during the election. The following quotations illustrate how the political values and ideals a participant held informed how they cast their vote on election day:

I think in a lot of ways I decide on whether I like the leader, whether I share their values. [Participant 3, p. 5]

Politics can be quite a personal stance in some ways, it's aligning those with your own political ideals. [Participant 1, p. 5]

The participant’s political values and beliefs influenced what information sources they engaged with as well as how they engaged with them, as illustrated by the following quotations:

For me I usually vote Labor so I don't take a lot of notice of the flyers [the Liberal party] hand out. [Participant 3, p. 7]

With the printed handouts usually somebody's pushing an opinion or pushing a point of view.

I read it and if it matches my beliefs or opinions than I might take that on board but if it doesn't I'll sort of just discard it and not think about it [Participant 2, p. 2]

In addition to personal political values and ideals several participants noted that once they had become affiliated with a particular political party, the habit of voting for that party was a key element in informing how they cast their vote:

I don't that that I did use information to inform my vote. Probably it was more like a habitual thing... I don't think that there was any particular thing that made me go 'oh I'm going to vote exactly this way 'cause of...' [Participant 6, p. 4]

Unless something really bad happens with the folks that I'm following I wouldn't really change my views. [Participant 5, p. 3]

Even when the participant noted that the information shared by their preferred party was unhelpful, the habit of voting for a particular party prevailed:

I feel there was a lack of communication from both parties about actual things that they were going to achieve...for me the Labor Party campaign was a lot of attack ads and that wasn't helpful for me in terms of getting information about the things they have done or going to do. But I don't know if that was such a negative for me because I would probably vote for Labor anyway. [Participant 3, p. 4]

Party Politics

The party politics theme, like the personal politics theme, reveals the ‘context’ of the person’s information experience, it highlights aspects of the information experience that are unique to voting in an election. Knowing about current politicians and being able to understand the policies of the parties was a key focus of the research partici-

part's information experiences, as illustrated by the following quotations:

So I think it is important to try and get the policies. But then the flip side of that is that sometimes it can be quite hard to understand exactly what the policies are, if it's not clear. 'Cause quite often the media can focus on more personality politics, rather than policies. [Participant 1, p. 4]

So if someone of a particular party has done something that goes against those party's values, then I'd want to find out a bit more especially if it's a party I support, rather than another party. [Participant 2, p. 3]

Participants noted how the preferences of the political party they supported informed their own preferential voting behavior:

You've got a million and one candidates you're not entirely sure who's the really goodies and the real badies... if the Labor Party's saying...I wouldn't slavishly follow their preference but I use it as a general guide to the things that I haven't bothered finding out about. [Participant 6, p. 6]

But participants commented on the challenges in finding out accurate and reliable information about the political parties, noting the role of the parties themselves in this issue:

I don't think the parties to my mind they don't even try to put out the sensible information, like the detailed bits of information that some people might actually find interesting and that might actually help. [Participant 6, p. 9]

I feel there was a lack of communication from both parties about actual things that they were going to achieve...for me the Labor Party campaign was a lot of attack ads and that wasn't helpful for me in terms of getting information about the things they have done or going to do. [Participant 3, p. 4].

For one participant this situation resulted in them struggling to remain interested and informed:

I get a little disinterested so staying interested is a bit of a challenge. Purely because there's so much slagging and you know 'they said this' and 'he said/she said' but so that's a challenge keeping interesting and therefore keeping myself informed is a challenge. [Participant 2, p. 3]

Sense Making

The sense making theme also reveals the 'context' of the person's information experience, it highlights aspects of the information experience that are unique to voting in an election. Conversations with family, friends and colleagues helped the participants to make sense of the election and were a core part of the participant's information experience, as illustrated by the following quotation:

I'll discuss it with my girlfriend and I'd discuss it with my mum and for example my mum sometimes in the morning she's read the news, she get the Australian newspaper every day and so sometimes then I see here we'll have a discussion about what she read or generally how it's going. [Participant 3, p. 5]

Through these conversations participants were able to express their concerns and to learn about the opinions of others and thereby help to reduce uncertainty and to obtain greater clarity:

Sometimes I just want to get their opinion. Mainly with family, sometimes I just want them, family members to tell me their interpretation of a situation or...what a party stands for. [Participant 2, p. 4]

However participants were aware that the individuals with whom they conversed influenced their understandings and perceptions of the election:

With the benefit of hindsight and the absolute smashing that Labor got, I clearly don't think that I was terribly informed, exactly on what was going on, and maybe that was because the people that I was listening to were probably more from the Labor supporting side of things, rather than the other side. [Participant 6, p. 3]

One participant commented on the ongoing flow of the conversations they had with others about the election (e.g. the lead up, during and after the campaign):

We talked about it in the lead up to it and then after the election we discussed what happened...all that dissecting what happened [Participant 3, p. 5]

The role of technology such as social media in facilitating conversations with others, especially those geographically remote was noted by a number of participants:

If there was something came to light that I didn't agree with I'd potentially place that on Facebook or something like that. Some of my Facebook friends might not have the same political inclination as me, but it's interesting to use that as an information tool. [Participant 1, p. 1]

[Using Twitter] I get a feeling for of what other people, what their opinions are..I have a lot of friends from Sydney Uni and... its funny because one of them is particularly liberal and has been following [the election] a lot and he post... links to different sites ...so I just kind of generally cast my eyes there from time to time to see if there is something that might help me keep up to date or I don't know to get the gist of some of what the people are thinking. [Participant 4, p. 1]

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This chapter has presented the preliminary findings of a pilot study that explored people's information experiences during the 2012 Queensland State election. The study adds to a small but growing body of work exploring people's voting activities in Australia. By exploring information experience the study does not focus on people's engagement with a specific information source (e.g. the Internet), or a particular information task (e.g. information seeking), nor does it separate people from the world in which they inhabit. Instead the study has directed attention to the complex, holistic nature of people's lived engagement with information during an election.

In keeping with previous work (e.g. Farnsworth & Owen, 2003; Lusoli, 2005; Norrison & Curtice, 2007; Wells & Dudash, 2007), this study has revealed that people engage with a broad range of information sources when voting (e.g. 'information sources' and 'sense making' themes) and that people connect with information during an election in different ways (e.g. 'information flow' theme). The current study however also reveals the integral role that context plays in shaping a person's information world. The 'personal politics' and 'party politics' themes provide evidence of this. These two themes are unique to the context of voting and reveal how people are informed by their own internal 'information' (e.g. their personal political values, ideas and habits) as well as the external 'information' from political parties (e.g. party voting preferences, party activities, a politician's conduct), respectively. Finally the study has also revealed that context influences how people connect with information (e.g. 'sense making' theme), and that the kinds or 'what' information people use, and how they connect with information is dynamic, and varies over the course of an election (e.g. before, during and after voting).

Although these research findings are preliminary in nature due to the size of the participant sample, some tentative discussion regarding the practical and theoretical implications of the study can be made. With regard to practical implications, these findings provide an evidence-base that could be used to inform the design and dissemination of products and services providing political and electoral information and education for citizens. For example, enhanced knowledge and understanding about citizens' information experiences could be used by statutory organisations such as the Australian Electoral Commission, or State and Territory Electoral Commissions that are responsible for educating and informing the community about electoral rights and responsibilities. In addition, these findings provide an evidence-base that could likewise be used to inform the information practices of Australian political parties and candidates, as well as media agencies that provide political commentary to inform or engender citizen debate regarding political matters. From a theoretical perspective, these preliminary findings have provided an enhanced and more nuanced understanding of what is 'informing' to citizens in the context of a political election. As such these findings provide an enhanced theoretical understanding of 'what' may be regarded as 'information' to citizenry.

The findings of this study also suggest a number of directions for future research. As a pilot study, this research has provided a foundation to substantiate the relevance and value of extending this research to a larger population sample that would provide a more in-depth exploration of people's information experiences during an election campaign. Interest could also be turned to studies that investigate people's information experiences during election campaigns for different levels of government in Australia, that is, elections at federal, state or territory and local levels. This would enable examination of whether differences exist in people's information experiences that relate to the specific electoral context. Finally,

further research in this area could investigate a specific demographic within the Australian voting population, such as the information experiences of 'first-time' voters. Here, research could examine whether and how information experiences may differ according to prior experience with voting.

CONCLUSION

In this investigation, the information experience of people during the 2012 State Election is depicted by five themes: (i) information sources, (ii) information flow, (iii) personal politics, (iv) party politics, and (v) sense making. Each of these themes describes a key aspect of the participants' overall information experience. The 'information sources' theme reveals the 'what' of the person's information experience; it describes what is experienced as information. The 'information flow' theme reveals the 'how' of the person's information experience; it describes how information is experienced. The 'personal politics', 'party politics' and 'sense making' themes reveal the 'context' of the person's information experience, they highlight aspects of the information experience that are unique to voting in an election. They also reveal 'what' participant's experience as informing within that unique context (e.g. the 2012 State Election). The study outlined here is one of an emerging area of enquiry exploring information experience as a research object. This study has revealed that people's information experiences – at least within the context of voting for an election – are rich, complex and dynamic. Information experience is a construct worthy of further investigation. This study has shown that researching information experience provides deep insights into the ways in which people relate to their information worlds. More research exploring information experience within different contexts is needed to help develop our theoretical understanding of this important and emerging construct.

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ADDITIONAL READING

Bruce, C. S., & Partridge, H. (2011, November). *Identifying and delineating information experience as a research domain: A discussion paper*. Paper presented at Social Media and Information Practices Workshop, Borås, Sweden.

Kaid, L. L. (2002). Political advertising and information seeking: Comparing exposure via traditional and internet channels. *Journal of Advertising*, 31(1), 27–35. Retrieved from <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ujoa20/current> doi:10.1080/00913367.2002.10673658

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Election: This is the selection by vote of a person or persons from among candidates for a position, especially a political office.

Information Experience: This is presented here as two levels of understanding: a research domain, and a research object. It is the second level that is of most relevance to this study. Information experience is a research object, sitting alongside other information research objects such as information practice, information literacy, information seeking and information sharing. Studies exploring information experience as a research object direct attention to what is experienced as information, how information is experienced, the outcome of the information experience as well as the broader context in which the experience occurs.

Information: This is presented here as that which a person finds informing.

Voting: This refers to the act of expressing a preference for a political candidate or party.