

Information Behavior of Undocumented Latino/a/x Immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

The information behavior of migrants has increasingly become a focus of study in the Library and Information Studies (LIS) field. Migration is a process that requires individuals to acclimate to a new culture, space, and information environment, which presents many new challenges such as language barriers, social exclusion, and lack of knowledge about available resources and services. However, most of the existing LIS literature examines the information behavior of migrants who have had a legal entry into their new country and are authorized to remain and work in that country. Particularly in the United States, the past few decades have seen an exponential rise in the arrival of migrants from Latin America who are not authorized to enter or remain in the country. These undocumented migrants face specific challenges to information access due to their precarious legal status and therefore may exhibit information behaviors that differ from those of other more advantaged migrants. The information behavior of this marginalized subset of migrants is worthy of further study as this demographic continues to become an important and integral demographic of the United States population.

Introduction

Transnational migration is a complex and mentally, physically, and emotionally demanding process undergone by millions of people globally. Beginning in the last half of the twentieth century, every year has seen thousands of individuals from across Latin America migrate to the United States in search of greater social, economic, and political stability and opportunities. In the United States, immigrants from Mexico make up the largest percentage of immigrants from the region. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2022 there were over 10 million Mexican immigrants living in the United States, accounting for 23% of all immigrants in the country. As of 2022, there are 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, 4 million of whom are from Mexico, the largest number of any country of origin among undocumented immigrants. Undocumented immigrants are a significant demographic in the modern United States, evidenced by highly divisive political debates and policies surrounding immigration, deportation, and the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. Consequently, undocumented immigrants face many barriers to information access upon arrival and in the process of resettlement in the U.S., including language barriers, precarious legal status, and social marginalization.

Related Literature

While there is existing literature in the library and information science field on the information behavior of immigrants, there is an identifiable gap in the information practices of undocumented immigrants, an extremely marginalized subset of migrants living in the U.S. Undocumented immigrants, or those who are unauthorized to enter or remain in the country, experience extreme social exclusion. Like all immigrants, upon arrival they are faced with

navigating an unfamiliar information environment to obtain information that is critical to their settlement and survival in a new country. Caidi et al. (2010) define settlement as the “process by which immigrants adjust to their new homeland,” which includes “the search for housing, employment, schools for their children, healthcare, and the acquisition or improvement of English language skills.” Many factors influence the ease and success with which immigrants integrate into their new environments, such as “immigration policies, economic and labor market issues, public perception of and attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, and the degree of assistance provided by the government or other agencies to support resettlement” (Caidi, et al., 2010). In addition, unlike other migrants, undocumented immigrants are faced with many unique challenges due to their precarious legal status. Gomez (2016) argues that “by excluding them from legality, the state places undocumented migrants outside the boundaries of law, while selectively applying laws to systematically exclude them.” Undocumented migrants must navigate seeking the necessary information to acclimatize to their new environment while encountering obstacles such as anti-immigrant rhetoric and attitudes and lack of access to social services and employment opportunities reserved for citizens or residents.

As such, undocumented immigrants may exhibit information behaviors that pose less risk to them and their families than relying on formal, traditional sources of information, such as government agencies. According to Caidi et al. (2010), information practices also include the “myriad creative ways that individuals attempt to work around barriers that limit their information seeking” (p. 502). Gomez (2016) identifies two ways in which undocumented immigrants in the U.S. work around barriers to information retrieval and exchange: the “careful seeking of information from trusted sources,” and acting as a trusted source of information for others” (p. 3). Savolainen (2008) defines everyday information practices as a “set of socially and

culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources.” Cultures across Latin America, where many undocumented immigrants are coming from, are highly family and community-oriented, with many individuals looking to trusted members of a social network and community for reliable information; as opposed to official channels, such as government or educational institutions, which are typically the primary source of credible information in Western cultures. Fisher et al. (2004) found that low-income Latinx migrants and farm workers preferred to source their information from trusted informal sources, such as family and friends who emigrated to the region months or years earlier. Similarly, Courtright’s (2005) study of newly arrived Latinx immigrants in the U.S. found a preference for human sources over the internet when searching for health information. It is likely that these information behaviors are due to both cultural influences, as well as the fear associated with relying on agencies or organizations that are associated with the legal system that is disenfranchising them and capable of inflicting harm through detention, deportation, and other punitive legal measures.

Like many other non-English speaking immigrants, language is one of the greatest barriers to information access for Hispanic undocumented immigrants in the U.S, which are the linguistic majority among Latinx immigrants. Seeking information regarding housing, education, and healthcare is even more difficult for migrants when the information is not provided in their native language, or if translation services are not readily available, advertised, and provided. Therefore, as mentioned before, many immigrants may rely on other trusted sources of information, such as relatives or friends who have experience obtaining the desired services. Another common example of how immigrants work around language barriers is through the use of information mediators. Chu (1999) examines how children of immigrants, because of their

existing language skills or their ability to learn English more easily or quickly than their parents, act as translators for their families. Children translating for their immigrant parents is a common phenomenon that can be observed across racial and ethnic lines. Chu (1999) finds that children acting as information mediators can negatively impact the information retrieval process because of their translation skills, lack of emotional and mental maturity, and ability to grasp and communicate important information clearly. Consequently, undocumented immigrants relying on their children for translation may receive fully or partially incorrect or incomplete information.

Another theory that is often used to examine the information behavior of undocumented immigrants is that of Chatman's (1996) "information poverty," which can be defined as "lacking the necessary resources, such as adequate social networks and information-finding skills, that enable everyday life information seeking" (Caidi et al., 2010). This is particularly applicable for newly arrived immigrants who do not have an established social support network and are still learning to navigate their new information environment. As part of his everyday life information seeking theory, Savolainen (1995) identifies two information seeking practices: orienting and practical. Orienting refers to the daily monitoring of everyday events through various sources, especially the media, whereas practical refers to the information seeking to solve problems or perform specific tasks (Caidi et al., 2010). Among immigrants, orienting may include behavior such as seeking information about the new culture and country, cultural or religious events, and political information and current events (including information about their country of origin) (Caidi et al., 2010). On the other hand, seeking practical information may include looking for information about language services (training, translation, and interpretation), employment, community organizations, housing, health, transportation, banking, education, and more.

Like many other user groups, information and communication technologies like computers and the internet serve as important information sources for undocumented immigrants. These technologies allow for transnational communication with relatives through social media platforms and international communication applications like WhatsApp. Gomez' (2016) study of undocumented migrants living in Seattle found that many used social media sites like Facebook as a tool for the "preservation of historical memory," where photos and updates can be uploaded and shared with loved ones in their country of origin. Undocumented immigrants also report utilizing the public library for resources such as English-language and computer classes, books, and other media. Gomez (2016) argues that the public library offers undocumented immigrants an opportunity to stray from the "careful seeking of information from trusted sources, characteristic of one who lives more transient and ephemeral existence, toward more ambitious, open seeking and use of diverse information sources" (p. 29). Public libraries, as opposed to other local, federal, or state government entities, may feel more secure and less threatening to undocumented migrants because they do not require citizenship or permanent residency to utilize their services, nor do they inquire about legal status upon opening a library account. Most public libraries only require proof of physical residency in the service area they serve, which many undocumented immigrants qualify for. Though the public library is frequently viewed as a portal to a larger information universe, which helps to strengthen the information practices of migrants as they settle and integrate, they are rarely fully integrated due to the "generally irremediable exclusion of their undocumented status" (Gomez, 2016).

There remain numerous barriers to information access for undocumented immigrants. Among them are social isolation and exclusion, cultural and linguistic barriers, and hostile and

unsympathetic attitudes from service providers (Caidi et al., 2010). An example of a cultural barrier may be the “clashes between the ethnocultural and religious beliefs [of immigrants] and Western medical care” (Weerasinghe, 2000, p. 11). Many undocumented immigrants from Latin America hail from countries of origin that are predominantly Catholic and culturally conservative, which affect cultural understanding and norms surrounding health, illness, and treatment, among other things. For example, a Latina migrant may have trouble accessing information about reproductive health care, such as abortion or birth control, due to the shame, stigma, and taboo surrounding these services in their native cultures or religions. When providers’ communications and outreach services do not consider these differences in cultural values and belief systems, it is more likely that immigrants will not receive the information or services they need. In instances where information is available in their native language, undocumented immigrants may still refrain from seeking information out of fear of exposing their legal status, which could result in many negative and traumatic consequences, at best discrimination and at worst detention or deportation. The racism and xenophobia present in federal immigration policies is a detriment to the sense of safety, security, and inclusion of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., thus greatly impacting their information behavior.

Expert’s Information

The expert interviewed for this section is an undocumented Mexican woman in her 50s who immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1990s. She has resided in Oklahoma for over 30 years and is a mother to three adult daughters, all of whom are U.S. citizens by birthright. When recounting her experiences after arriving in Chicago, Illinois in July 1992, she recalls that she found information about potential housing through her brothers who had immigrated years earlier and were already living in Chicago at the time. They found a basement apartment rented out by

another Mexican family. Through the family renting out their apartment, especially the matriarch, they gathered information to orient themselves, such as the location of the local Catholic church, pharmacy, and Mexican grocery stores in the area. When looking for information about jobs, she looked in local newspapers and asked around with people, mostly other Mexican immigrants, that she met and befriended at the local church. The first job she secured, at a book printing company, she learned about through the woman who leased her apartment. The woman introduced her to another woman and who told her about the job and offered her and other community members rides to work, which was about a 30-minute drive away. At the time, the interviewee could not drive and did not have a vehicle. Her second job, a childcare/babysitting job with another Mexican family, she learned about through an ad in the local newspaper.

The interviewee recalls that, at the time in the early 1990s, there was no widely available internet or cellphones to aid in their information retrieval. Most of the information she encountered and sought was through word-of-mouth and informal networks of communication, among community members and between trusted individuals. At the church, she and another friend received information about English classes offered at a local school, which they later enrolled in. When it came to communicating with friends and relatives back home, she wrote and mailed letters for casual conversation, and made telephone calls for more urgent and pressing matters, although she recalls that it was expensive to make international calls at the time. Overall, she recalls not using libraries or government agencies and relying heavily on community members for information. For news information, she watched television, specifically Spanishlanguage channels like Univision, which covered topics like U.S. elections, crime, and general American politics. Since she arrived the summer leading up to a presidential election, she remembers seeing news covering the election of Bill Clinton.

The interviewee did not initially seek out information about how to apply for American citizenship because she was aware that she did not meet the qualifications to apply at the time.

After years of living in the U.S., and moving to Oklahoma in 1996, she began to expand her sphere of information sources and used the public library to find information about potential jobs. She recalls learning about prekindergarten schools for her eldest daughter through the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program where she sought out other services. Years later, when her eldest daughter was old enough to petition for citizenship on her behalf, she found legal information about applying for citizenship on social media and information about reputable lawyers to hire through friends and community members. Today, she gathers information about community and social events through social media sites like Facebook, as well as through friends and community members. She uses Google to search for specific information, such as how to file taxes through the IRS, and social media for more general information, such as social events. She still watches television for news and is an active member of her local Catholic church, which serves as a communal space and information ground.

Discussion

The expert interviewee's information behavior corresponds with most of the existing literature on the information practices of undocumented immigrants. As a newly arrived immigrant, she underwent a process of resettlement as described by Caidi et al. (2010), in which she sought out information about housing, employment, and more. During this resettlement process, she relied heavily on trusted, human information sources, such as biological relatives and community members, to retrieve desired information. This corresponds to Gomez' (2016) study of the ways in which undocumented immigrants in the U.S. carefully seek information

from trusted sources, and alternatively act as trusted information sources for others. It also corresponds to Fisher et al.'s (2004) study of how undocumented Latinx farmworkers preferred to gather information from informal, human sources, such as family or community members. The interviewee mentions learning of a local Catholic church through a trusted community member, where she was able to meet other Mexican immigrants and learned of other employment opportunities and community services. Interviewee's cultural and religious beliefs led her to a church that served as an information ground during resettlement and beyond, illustrating the importance of immigrants' ethnocultural and religious beliefs to their information seeking (Weerasinghe, 2000). In this case, the interviewee was able to locate and utilize information using cultural, religious, and community ties, as opposed to other formal or official information channels, which is the norm in Western cultures.

Furthermore, the interviewee was able to maintain communication with relatives and loved ones in her home country through phone calls and written communication in the form of letters. Later, as information technologies developed, she adopted the use of social media as a communication tool and information source, both sharing personal updates and content about her life in the U.S. and gathering information about events in her local community, which aligns with Gomez' (2016) study of the ways undocumented immigrants use social media as a tool to preserve cultural ties to their countries of origin. After years of living in the U.S., the interviewee expanded her sphere of information sources beyond trusted community members to include institutions such as the public library and other government agencies. This aligns with Gomez' (2016) study of how undocumented immigrants utilize institutions like the public library to engage more confidently in open information seeking, as opposed to the more insular information seeking that occurs within the confinement of their immigrant communities.

Lastly, the interviewee demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, an ability to work around barriers to information access that many undocumented immigrants encounter, such as language and social exclusion. This behavior is consistent with the understanding of information behavior as including all the ways in which immigrants locate information despite existing barriers (Caidi et al. 2010). An example of the interviewee overcoming a language barrier is her seeking information about local and national news through Spanish-language sources like newspapers and the popular Spanish-language television broadcasting company Univision. Another example is relying on information mediators, which are English-speaking relatives, often children, of immigrants who translate and relay information to them (Chu, 1999). Although not explicitly mentioned in her interview, the interviewee did rely on her U.S. born daughters, who are all native English speakers, for translation services, especially in healthcare and educational settings.

Conclusion

While there appears to be a focus in the existing LIS literature on newly arrived immigrants and the process of resettlement, there is a noticeable lack of studies on the information behavior of undocumented immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for many years. As a marginalized subset of the larger immigrant community, it has proven more challenging for information researchers to study this population through direct participation. As such, there is a gap in the literature about how undocumented individuals persist in locating the information necessary to find jobs, enroll their children in schools, access health services, and create robust social networks. As evidenced by the expert interview and the literature review, since arriving in the U.S. undocumented immigrants have found ways to build rich communities and fulfilling lives here despite their social exclusion and political persecution. Considering the rise in

antiimmigrant rhetoric and the vehemently anti-immigrant stance of the upcoming presidential administration in the United States, it will behoove researchers to explore how these violent policies and threats of mass deportations will impact the information behavior of undocumented immigrants for years to come.

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