Risk and resilience in radically redefined information environments; information practices during the COVID-19 pandemic

Annemaree Lloyd | Alison Hicks

University College, London, UK

Correspondence
Annemaree Lloyd, University College, London, UK.
Email: annemaree.lloyd@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract
The concept of risk, which is defined as a threat to health, wellbeing, financial and employment stability, pervades the COVID-19 pandemic. These risks are intensified through people's access to and ability to engage with appropriate information. The research reported investigates how information practices enable people to mitigate risks and build the resilience to cope with ongoing uncertainty. The poster will present initial findings from a small pilot study that was carried out in the UK in May–June 2020. Online interviews were used to examine the lived experience of people as the pandemic progressed. Areas that were explored included awareness of emerging risk, and experiences of changing conditions that impacted on working, educational, well-being and caring practices. A constructivist grounded theory frames the analysis and enables the development of themes which contribute to an emerging risk and resilience narrative. Findings from this research will provide insight into global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, while further establishing foundational knowledge that will be useful for civil contingency, emergency services, health and education professions looking to support prepared and informed communities.

1 | INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is radically redefining people's information experiences (Xie et al., 2020). The pandemic has produced complex and multilayered information environments that span a range of new information sources, including scientific, medical, mental health and government advice. This information is further tailored, repackaged and communicated by multiple actors across multiple information channels, including social media, peer review websites and governmental websites. New ways of interacting with others (in work, or socially), which are being encouraged as a result of governmental social distancing policies, further impact how information is shared and disseminated in the community (Hagar, 2010).

The multiplicity and complexity of these pandemic information environments creates risks to health as well as financial, employment and family stability. These risks are intensified through confusion about where to find information when traditional methods and strategies are disrupted or when people are forced to develop rapid new ways of determining the veracity and trustworthiness of rumours and hearsay (Hagar, 2010). Leading to the potential for misinformation (Xie et al., 2020), these information problems may further cause people to cut
themselves off from or avoid information as a way to manage overload or mediate stress, anxiety and mental health issues (Shklovski et al., 2008). Ongoing uncertainties consequently impact people’s capacity to understand crisis information environments and build information practices that scaffold informed decision making and broader questions of resilience.

The study’s central research goal is to build a picture of how people use information to mitigate risks and build resilience during a time of global crisis. The research questions that underscore these goals are:

- What role do information practices play in mitigating risks produced by the pandemic?
- How is the development of resilient information practices constrained and enabled?

In answering these questions, this research builds upon and extends work that has started to explore the impact that risk has upon academic information interactions (e.g. Hicks, 2019, 2020) as well as the role that information resilience plays within health literacy (Lloyd, 2014). Prior research has established how the stress of upheaval catalyses the development of vital mapping and connection-building activities (Hicks, 2019, 2020; Lloyd, 2014). The pilot study reported here expands this work through focusing on everyday and workplace settings and studying the impact of ongoing risk upon resilience, as people are forced to adjust to constantly changing advice and guidelines. It also enables a closer examination of the impact that physical and social distancing has upon the disruption and establishment of information strategies during risky situations (Hagar, 2010) as well as wider questions related to trust and credibility, particularly in relation to official health and social messaging. In emphasising risk, this study will build upon and extend crisis informatics work that studied the 2001 outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the UK, an example of an ongoing yet localised disaster (Hagar, 2010), as well as research that has examined time-delimited natural or climate crises (e.g. Shklovski et al., 2008).

2 | METHODOLOGY

The small pilot study reported here is employing constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) to identify the themes and narratives that shape people’s information experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Constructivist grounded theory offers a systematic approach to exploring social and temporal experiences, guiding data collection and analysis that is grounded in peoples’ experiences and perspectives of the pandemic. Situational analysis methods (Clarke, 2005) are also being employed to visually map and analyse data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online to collect data. Interview questions focused on (a) Transition to new working, furlough or unemployment conditions and/or caring roles, including use of technology, altered social connections and physical mobility; (b) Changing health, social, workplace and family information needs, including finding and locating reliable information; (c) Evaluating information sources, including experience of rumours, misinformation and fake news during the pandemic. Interviews lasted between 30–60 min and took place online using end-to-end encrypted video conferencing tools.

Twelve participants were recruited for the study. This sample size was considered sufficient to enable variation of response and saturation to occur. Participants were recruited via researcher and institutional social media accounts as well as personal connections. Participants were employed in a variety of roles during the pandemic, including people who were working from home or were adapting to work under social distancing rules, people who were furloughed/ made redundant and people who were engaged in new volunteer, caring or homeschooling roles. Participants also represented a range of different ethnicities, age-ranges and genders and were located in a variety of geographic locations in the UK.

3 | FINDINGS

Findings from this study are still emerging. Participants highlight how their understanding of risk emerged and the range of social, economic, educational and employment risks that they face. To mitigate these risks, participants engaged in a number of social, corporeal and textual information activities to help them map and orient themselves within a new environment as well as to reconcile existing practices. Various information sources emerged as cognitive authorities, while participants also reported attempts to mediate conspiracy theories and misinformation amidst frequently changing legal requirements and social expectations. Findings also suggest varying degrees of information overload, as well as renewed attention on avoiding and ignoring information as people mediate mental health and other ongoing challenges. As analysis is still ongoing, more complete and detailed findings will be presented during the poster session.

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