

Youth Information Interaction Research in the Pandemic: Adjustments, Innovations, Implications

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ABSTRACT

For over a year, the pandemic has forced youth to alter their routines and rely almost exclusively on technology to learn, play and connect with family and friends. Although some alterations in youth's routine seem to be temporary, some adaptations and appropriations resulting from interactions with technology will likely be forever altered. As this scenario develops, we must reflect on how these permanent changes will affect our approaches and inquiries on youth information interaction. This 90-minute panel will convene scholars and members of the ASIS&T community interested in discussing the present and the future of digital youth research. Panelists will mediate focused conversations with participants to generate a collective account of experiences and reflections based on challenges and research plans for after the pandemic. As the implications of a global pandemic are unfolding, youth information interaction research will be critical to inform policies and programs in education and reduce digital divides.

KEYWORDS

Digital youth; Information behavior; Digital divides; COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

For many of us, the global COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the way we work, learn and play. The same can be said for young people, who have been forced to adopt new information practices (online schooling, virtual visits with relatives, Zoom playdates and birthday parties with friends) or have intensified their use of established technologies (e-reading platforms, search interfaces, and social networks). Some of these adaptations and appropriations will be temporary, but there are indications that some of our information interactions may be forever altered (Bradford, 2021). These transformations also affect how we study youth information interaction – the phenomena we see as important, the questions we ask, the methods we use to engage with youth have and will be changed by this realignment of people, place, and technology. How are youth information interaction (YII) researchers navigating this changing space? What will youth research look like post-pandemic? Will we ever be “post-pandemic”? This 90-minute panel seeks to engage diverse scholars and the ASIS&T community to explore these questions and others to better understand the present and future of digital youth research.

Historically, youth information interaction (YII) studies have been conducted in face-to-face environments, with only a few of these studies adopting distanced data gathering, trace data or secondary data sets (Agosto, 2019). The main focus of YII studies lies in understanding the interactions between youth and information by engaging with young participants using qualitative methods, or using lab-based experiments. Researchers have altered their research frameworks and methodologies due to the current pandemic restrictions (Lealand, 2020). As social distancing measures have compromised face-to-face research, we have the opportunity to evaluate the challenges and opportunities in conducting distanced studies with youth. What possibilities exist to investigate YII data generated via digital platforms? What creative, insightful or alternative paradigms exist or were employed by fellow scholars? How can we conduct this work safely, ethically, and with minimal risk to youth participants who are already vastly increasing their screen time due to online schooling?

This panel will map out the collective account of experiences and reflections on how the pandemic has affected youth's research agenda and methodologies, and gather insights on how YII scholars have overcome challenges emerging in this scenario. YII studies often intersect with learning experiences in and outside of the classroom; thus, it encompasses educational practices and policies. At a time in which youth depend more on digital platforms to learn, connect with peers and entertain themselves, YII research will be fundamental to inform policies and

programs to engage with the challenges of digital literacies and skills as well as conceptual and technical divides among young people.

BACKGROUND

Distanced data collection

Methodologies to collect online data using digital tools have been around since the inception of the internet (Kozinets, 2015). Anthropology and media studies scholars have gathered transactional log data (e.g., online posts on social media) (Pink et al., 2016), and used video conferencing software and mobile applications to collect data (Archibald et al., 2019; Gibson, 2020). The studies conducted in those disciplines investigated online behaviors and “offline” social practices of diverse populations, including vulnerable and hard-to-access communities. As a result, most of these studies have provided methodological foundations for scholars interested in collecting online and distanced data.

To a smaller extent, YII research has explored online and distanced procedures to collect and analyze data. Some YII studies have gathered transactional log data to measure the frequencies and identify patterns in youth’s information-seeking and retrieval activities (Duarte Torres et al., 2014). Other studies analyzed YouTube videos to identify early childhood interactions with technology (Hourcade et al., 2015) or YouTube comments to ascertain learning traces (Meyers, 2014). More recently, researchers surveyed data from large-scale projects to provide evidence on how youth information behavior has changed through the years (Bowler et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these studies are the exception rather than the norm; they do not provide a roadmap for the adoption of digital tools (e.g., video conferencing software and mobile applications) to collect data with youth participants.

The current pandemic imposed changes in research plans and timelines. Many researchers were forced either to put off their studies or develop strategies to transition to distanced data collection. The researchers opting for deferring their research questioned the validity of the data collected using digital tools and, consequently, the cogency of study outcomes (Lealand, 2020). Other scholars decided to proceed with their plans, adapting methodologies and designing their studies for distanced data collection procedures (Lobe et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the restrictions imposed by the pandemic might create opportunities and challenges for researchers in several ways.

In the realm of opportunities, the current circumstances have fostered novel methodologies supported by digital technologies. Furthermore, these methodologies might help to explore the implications of the increased use of digital technologies during the pandemic for youth. At this time, it is unclear whether digital data collection through applications like Zoom might allow researchers to diversify their participant samples and reach new conclusions or simply reinforce the biases already present in research with youth. We can all agree that conducting distanced research with youth brings several challenges. First, access to digital platforms is limited to persons over the age of thirteen in most cases. Second, recruiting and accessing youth’s transactional logs involve more levels of privacy than those of adults. Finally, video conferencing and applications might work better with older populations than youth.

Youth’s Digital Experiences during the Pandemic

Most schools moved their teaching activities to digital platforms that were not initially designed for primary and secondary education learning experiences (Bradford, 2021; Chandra et al., 2020). Thus, the transition to online/hybrid learning has two immediate implications. First, technology access and literacy imbalances are likely to affect young people’s learning outcomes. Second, the increased use of digital platforms in learning might affect how educators and parents perceive the role of technology in the classroom and the home.

As teaching has shifted to online and hybrid formats, reports have surfaced that youth are struggling to access online platforms and achieve learning outcomes. Schools were not prepared to deliver their classes using online/hybrid formats due to technological challenges (e.g., lack of technical infrastructure, insufficient electronic devices for students) (Ascione, 2021; Donoso & Retzmann, 2021). Educators and parents were not prepared for online/hybrid formats, thus struggling to keep youth motivated and engaged (Reilly, 2020).

Educators, parents and policymakers are evaluating the implications of online/hybrid learning. In a joint initiative to work collaboratively to keep youth motivated, educators and policymakers have been discussing how to reduce the barriers to information and digital literacy (Bradford, 2021). One strategy is the implementation of programs focusing on the reduction of digital divides and digital and information literacy training (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). As a result, educators, parents and policymakers might be gradually changing their mindsets about using digital tools to support learning. As youth scholars, we must be ready to explore the extent to which the pandemic has affected youth’s learning experiences and information behavior.

Despite enormous uncertainty, this much is clear: we who research and practice with young people in the information professions will be stronger through shared stories of our collective address of these changing

circumstances. While the approach to YII research and practice in the last 12 months may be ad hoc, the opportunities and innovations discussed in this forum may provide hope and inspiration for the years to come.

PANEL FORMAT (90 MINUTES)

Session Introduction (5 minutes)

The moderator will introduce the panelists and briefly discuss the panel topic.

Panel Discussion (20 minutes)

Each panelist will have 5 minutes to discuss their experiences and reflections as YII scholars during the pandemic. The discussions will cover the following topics: youth methodologies and research frameworks emerging from the pandemic; implications of the increased use of digital technology by youth, information literacy and digital divides; challenges and opportunities for YII studies after the pandemic.

Group Activity (60 minutes)

Attendees will be assigned to four groups and participate in focused conversations with one panelist for 30 minutes. Each panelist will facilitate discussions gravitating around the following themes: adjustments to the existing research procedures; innovations in youth's methodologies; and implications to YII's research agenda. Each group will map out the insights and identify themes/patterns concerning challenges and potential approaches for YII research in a post-pandemic world.

Each group will be invited to share their findings with the larger group during a 30-minute discussion. The four maps containing the themes/patterns covering challenges and potential approaches for YII research post-pandemic will be made available for future consultations via an online cloud storage service (e.g., Google Drive).

Wrap-up (5 minutes)

The moderator will thank panelists and attendees and close the session.

PANEL MEMBERS

Dr. Dania Bilal, University of Tennessee, Knoxville (Panelist)

Dania's research focuses on youth information behavior and interaction and sits at the intersection of human-computer interaction and information retrieval. She has researched different aspects of youth information interaction, paying attention to their cognitive and emotional developments, information needs, and experiential learning. Her research has made implications for theory and practice, advocating for system design informed by youth's mental models and learning. Her current projects focus on theory and theorizing in youth information behavior research and interaction, human-centered AI, and AI literacy. During the Pandemic, she postponed projects involving youth. She will share stories documenting youth information interaction during the Pandemic.

Dr. Eric M. Meyers, University of British Columbia (Panelist)

Eric's research sits at the intersection of information science and the learning sciences. His recent work has focused on how crafting and prototyping activities in informal learning settings, specifically Maker Camps and library-based coding and crafting programs, support the development of design literacies and computational thinking, the skills and attitudes that facilitate understanding of today's complex information and communication technologies. During the pandemic, Eric has turned his focus to the textual ecosystems that describe, influence and condition youth information interaction, including youth literature, film and immersive media. If one cannot study children coding, how is code and coding represented in children's media? What does this say about how we frame children's participation in computationally rich learning activities?

Dr. Sophie Rutter, University of Sheffield (Panelist)

Sophie's research explores how environments affect the way children interact with, and use, information: for instance, how the school environment influences the way children and teachers use search technologies and search for information. She has also worked with school children to co-design handwashing communication. Since the pandemic Sophie has become interested in how the online/hybrid environment may have affected children's information-seeking for their school work: how such research can be conducted online, as well as methodologies for doing research with (and not just about) children in an online environment.

Dr. Rachel M. Magee, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Panelist)

Rachel M. Magee is a youth advocate and assistant professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her work in the School of Information Sciences is informed by her background as a librarian, and her current research collaborates with teens and public libraries as co-researchers focused on youth cultures, literacies, and technology experiences. In the panel, Magee will reflect on how these research interactions have shifted online as well as the affective impacts of the pandemic on the abilities and interests of teens, library staff, and researchers to engage in this complex, collaborative work.

Vanessa Figueiredo, Ph.D. Candidate University of British Columbia (Organizer & Moderator)

Vanessa's research explores how young people shape their interactions with information and information systems in the school context. Due to the current pandemic, she adapted her research plan to conduct distanced data collection using Zoom. The methodological changes motivated her to organize a panel to collect experiences of doing YII research during the pandemic and reflect on how the current restrictions will affect YII experiences. She will moderate the discussions and activities proposed for the panel.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This panel will encourage scholars to share their experiences during the pandemic and propose reflections on the future of youth scholarship in the face of unrivalled changes. The outcomes of this panel will support researchers to identify critical areas in youth studies and devise flexible research plans. We hope to co-develop an agenda with the attendees of this session that will push YII research forward. By promoting robust conversation and minimizing the "talking head" segments common in panels, we seek to develop a rich and engaging experience for all attendees. We also anticipate this panel and the ensuing conversation will act as a springboard for future publications, or perhaps a special journal issue focused on methods and frameworks for studying youth information interaction under complex circumstances or focused on distance-technology-enabled techniques with children.

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