

# Conceptions of Everyday Life in Information Science

**Hartel, Jenna**

University of Toronto, Canada | jenna.hartel@utoronto.ca

**Ndumu, Ana**

University of Maryland, USA | andumu@umd.edu

**Ocepek, Melissa**

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA | mgocepek@illinois.edu

**Ruthven, Ian**

University of Strathclyde, Scotland | ian.ruthven@strath.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

This panel examines conceptions of everyday life in Information Science. Several theories about everyday life and its information phenomena will be reviewed and analyzed for their origins, distinctions, and divergent claims. Four expert panelists who have published on these matters will encapsulate their ideas, and there will be a video interlude, as well. By design, the panel Agenda features short opening statements, leaving 40 minutes to discuss: *How do existing notions of everyday life within Information Science bring information into focus in different ways? Are informational conceptions of everyday life adequate or wanting of critical re-examination?* In keeping with ASIS&T's multiperspective community, inputs will be sought from students, practitioners, first-time conference attendees, and other groups, in turn. If, as Marcia J. Bates claims, we are "...always looking for the red thread of information in the social texture of people's lives" (1999, p. 1048) then we need to individually and collectively reflect on the nature of everyday life.

## KEYWORDS

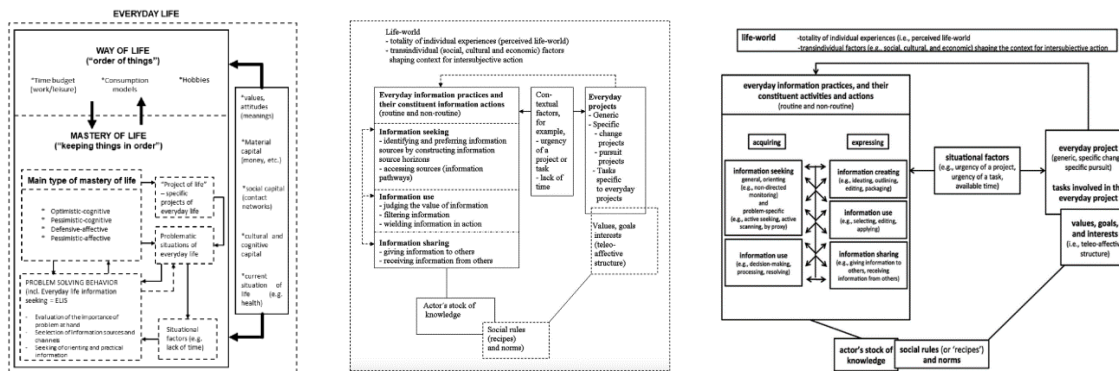
Everyday life, ELIS, information behavior, information practice, life transitions

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of the 2024 ASIS&T annual meeting is "Putting People First." What could be a more people-first concept than *life* itself? Life is "the condition that distinguishes animals and plants from inorganic matter" (dictionary.com). Indeed life (and its less welcome partner, death) are the inescapable and unifying qualities of humankind. Asking *What is life?* is, proverbially, like asking a fish *What is water?* Granting this, there has been only a handful of life-related concepts in the history of Information Science. As an exception, Bates (1974) departed from a tradition of research into scholarly communications and advanced the more universal notion of "life information," that is, "the information needed for daily living" (p. 51). Later, Chatman (1999) drew upon her ethnographic study of women prisoners to propose a Theory of Life in the Round, "a public form of life in which certain things are implicitly understood" (p. 212) and wherein information is not so important. Perhaps inspired by these precedents, in the 1990s there was an "everyday life turn" (Hartel, 2019) in Information Science, and a doubling in the volume of papers on the theme at the Information Seeking in Context conference (Vakkari, 2008). Nevertheless, Ocepek (2017) recently wrote that the concept of everyday life has "never been fully examined" (p. 398). For the first time in a public setting, our panel will round-up and problematize conceptions of information in "life" and "everyday life."

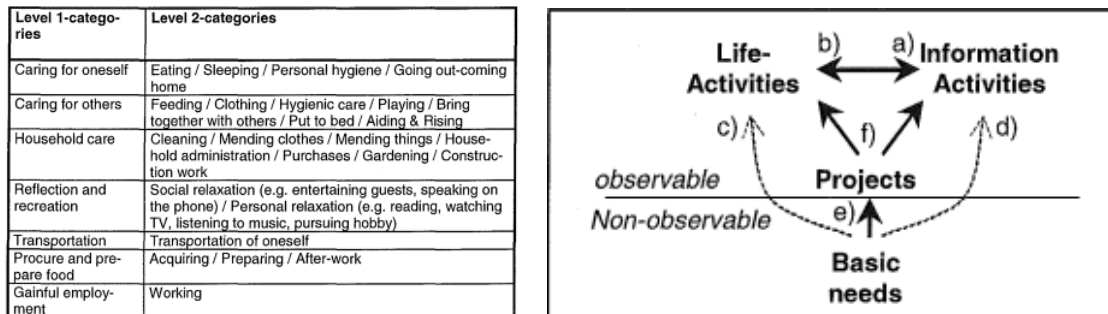
## BACKGROUND: VISIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Arguably, the most famous life-related statement in Information Science comes from Reijo Savolainen (1995). His epic article introduced "everyday life information seeking" and its "ELIS" acronym, replacing the concept of *life* with *everyday life*. Savolainen's intent was to bring attention to *non-work* information seeking, and ELIS was defined as, "the acquisition of various informational elements which people employ to orient themselves or to solve problems not directly connected with the performance of occupational tasks" (p. 267). Shown in Figure 1, his original framework was inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*; featured the original concepts of "Way of Life" and "Mastery of Life;" and suggests where, why, and how ELIS occurred. Savolainen has spent 25 years tinkering with his ELIS idea, generating two later progenies that are more practice-oriented, also appearing in Figure 1 (Savolainen, 2008; Savolainen & Thomson, 2022). Of note, a bibliometric profile of Savolainen's ELIS concept reports high but ultimately only ceremonial citing of the idea (González-Teruel and Pérez-Pulido, 2020).



**Figure 1.** Three frameworks of information in everyday life by Savolainen (1995, 2008), and at right, the current version by Savolainen and Thomson (2022). Since 1995, Savolainen has shifted towards practice theory, and expanded to include information creation, too. This history is chronicled in a video by Hartel (2022) and a snippet will be shown at the panel.

Another theoretical advance came in Hektor’s (2001) study of internet use in everyday life, which was based upon longitudinal interviews with ten Swedish households. Hektor borrowed from time-diary research in geography to establish seven daily activities (and their sub-activities) that are common to most people, shown in Figure 2. In contrast to Savolainen, who placed work *outside* of everyday life, Hektor includes it therein as “gainful employment.” Hektor also distinguishes “life activities” from “information activities,” thereby making it possible to operationalize Bates’ “red thread of information.” Another distinction in Hektor’s framework is that everyday life is organized as “projects” which are hierarchically ranked, nested, and may be “generic” (common to all people) or “specific” (a unique personal pursuit). Figure 2 displays Hektor’s deft assemblage.



**Figure 2.** From Hektor (2001), at left is a table of life activities that constitute everyday life, drawn from time-diary studies in the field of geography. At right, Hektor’s model relates life activities and information activities to projects within the context of everyday life.

A tributary of research in Information Science recognizes qualitatively different experiences across life, hypothesizing that such distinctions lead to fascinating (but largely undocumented) informational patterns. For example, Kari and Hartel (2007) asserted that there are “lower things in life,” marked by repetition and routine, and “higher things in life” which are “positive human phenomena, experiences, or activities that transcend the daily grind” (p. 1133). Leisure, and its learning-oriented area of “serious leisure,” have been spotlighted as pleasurable “higher things” that can be quite information-rich (Hartel, 2003, 2010, 2021a, 2021b). Gorichanaz (2019) advocated the study of information within “personally meaningful activities” (2019), which are the “sort of activities we live for, to be completely ourselves” (p. 1302). Nangia and Ruthven (2023) analyzed information seeking narratives concerning spirituality, contributing a framework of “profound information interactions” (2023, p. 933). All these visions imply that some parts of life may be more significant to our humanity than others, and Information Science research should calibrate its analytical attention, accordingly.

Ocepek’s study of grocery shopping (2018a) and subsequent manifesto, “Bringing out the everyday in everyday life information behavior” (Ocepek, 2018b) lend much momentum to this panel. The latter rightly argues that the concept of “everyday life” requires more careful consideration, for we do not know “how it relates to information behaviors in other contexts” (p. 398). Championing a “theory of the everyday” (Lefebvre, 2018; Shutz and Luckman, 1973),

Ocepek aims to remove artificial borders between work and non-work contexts, and to focus upon the “quotidian,” “banal,” and “unnoticed,” which constitute a “genuine reality” (Lefebvre, p. 137 cited by Ocepek, p. 399). This approach opens windows into non-expert information sources, non-traditional forms of information, relevant but not necessarily “information-rich” information environments, and new methodological avenues like institutional ethnography.

In 2022, Ruthven posited that “life transitions” establish the major contours of our lives and can be an important nexus for information research. Life transitions are often challenging events (such as illness, bereavement, or new parenthood) that disrupt the routine unfolding and coherence of the equilibrium which Savolainen (1995) calls “Mastery of Life.” Through a process of meta-ethnography, he generates a model of information flows across life transitions, organized as stages of understanding, negotiating, and resolving, shown in Figure 3 (Ruthven, 2022a). Accompanying the model is a theory of “information sculpting” which uses the universal practice of sculpting material as an evocative metaphor for the ways people shape information in their lives (Ruthven, 2022b, 2024).

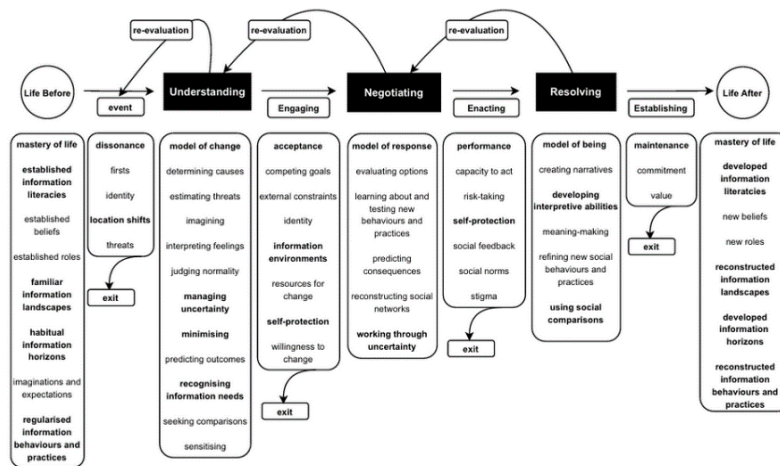


Figure 3. Ruthven’s information theory of life transitions (2022a).

Recently, Ndumu (2023) significantly enriched the “life” conversation in Information Science. From a more critically-oriented stance, she brings into view the everyday lives of Black women, revealing how information and technology work together for personal and collective meaning-making. After acknowledging the troubling reality of racist, capitalist, sexist technological infrastructures and the hurt they cause Black women, the paper shifts attention to positive everyday life information experiences of community, creativity, pleasure, healing, rest, peace, and loveliness. A methodological bonus of the paper is its range across literature and popular culture, invoking Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden’s: Womanist Prose* and recent online movements, like #SoftBlackGirlSummer. Ndumu (2023) gracefully brings together everyday life scholarship, higher and lower things (Kari & Hartel, 2007), and Critical Information Studies (Vaidhyathan, 2006), telling a story of information and technology in the lives of Black women that is poignant and thoroughly contextualized in this historical moment.

## THE AGENDA, PANELISTS, AND THEIR PRESENTATIONS

Jenna Hartel will provide a warm welcome, introduce the panelists, state the main contested aspects of existing conceptions of everyday life in Information Science, and play a 2-minute video on Savolainen’s ELIS framework (Hartel, 2022). Then, in the order shown in Figure 4, each panelist will delineate their vision of information in everyday life (as outlined above), speaking for about 8 minutes. To facilitate audience comprehension, and to establish clear points of comparison, panelists’ presentations will have some parallel elements, by consistently mentioning the origins, metatheoretical position, and definitions of “information,” and “information behavior/practice/experience” within their conception of everyday life. About 40 minutes will remain for a discussion that explores: *How do existing notions of everyday life within Information Science bring information into focus in different ways? Are informational conceptions of everyday life adequate or wanting of critical re-examination?* In keeping with ASIS&T’s multiperspective community, inputs will be sought from students, practitioners, first-time conference attendees, and other groups, in turn. We will also enact specific pedagogical tricks (such as inviting written remarks) that are designed to bring hesitant people into the conversation.



**Figure 4.** From left to right, the panelists: Jenna Hartel, Melissa Ocepek, Ian Ruthven and Ana Ndumu. A 2-minute video snippet about Reijo Savolainen’s “Everyday Life Information Seeking” (Hartel, 2022) will also be shown.

- Presentation Title: *Welcome and Introduction to the Panel*  
**Jenna Hartel** (Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto) is a theorist, methodologist, and educator of Information Science. Her lifelong motivating question is: What is the nature of information in the pleasures of life? As creator of the YouTube channel, INFIDEOS, she makes outrageously playful educational videos that communicate the ideas of Information Science to the world.
- Presentation Title: *Everyday Life is Quotidian*  
**Melissa G. Ocepek** (Assistant Professor, School of the Information Sciences, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) draws upon ethnographic methods and institutional ethnography to explore how individuals use information in their everyday lives. Her research interests include everyday information behavior, critical theory, copyright, and food studies. She received her Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin in the School of Information.
- Presentation Title: *Everyday Life is Kaleidoscopic*  
**Ian Ruthven** (Professor of Information Seeking and Retrieval, Department of Computer and Information Sciences, University of Strathclyde) explores the human experience of interacting with information, through theory, empirical research and conceptual modelling. He is the author of *Dealing with Change Through Information Sculpting* (2022).
- Presentation Title: *Everyday Life is Soft*  
**Ana Ndumu** (Assistant Professor, University of Maryland) focuses on the cross between social identity and information behavior, particularly how accessible and adequate information strengthens overlooked communities. Her recent works examine the information worlds of African, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx immigrants living in the U.S. Her publications include *The Black Librarian in America: Reflections, Resistance, and Reawakening* (Burns-Simpson, et al., 2022) and *Borders & Belonging: Critical Examinations of Library Approaches Toward Immigrants* (Ndumu, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The proposal at hand confirms that there are sundry conceptions of everyday life in Information Science. Yet a close inspection reveals conflicting claims about its very nature. On the one hand, everyday life is characterized as repetitious, mundane, and dealt with ruefully or dutifully; on the other hand it is deemed remarkable, precious, and the zenith of our humanity. Each conceptualization likewise casts “the red thread of information” (Bates, 1999) differently. What, then, are scholars of everyday life information to think or do next? We feel a “Putting People First” conference is the perfect moment for conceptual housekeeping, courteous sparring, intellectual camaraderie, and potential breakthroughs. Of note, this is a univocal and inclusive topic—since everyone is blessed with life.

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