

Alone Together: The information seeking behaviours of adult readers of superhero/costume comic books.

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Abstract

This article discusses the information seeking behaviour of adult readers of super hero/costumed comic books (which will be referred to simply as “comic books” from this point forward) who, despite sharing similarities with others who partake in leisure activities that are pleasurable and profound (Kari & Hartel, 2009), have been largely overlooked by the LIS discipline. Through the use of Sonnenwald’s Information Horizon Interview (2005), this article will explore the question, What information resources do adult readers of comic books use? A narrative analysis and style have been adopted in order to reflect/honour the strong story telling skills of the participants in the study. Though a conscious decision was made to forgo the use of metatheories and models, it was not a surprise when Erdelez’s information encountering (1999) and Ross’s finding without seeking (1999) manifested. It is believed that the lack of research into the information behaviour of comic book readers, as a growing subset of pleasure readers, presents a wide gap in LIS as a discipline but also an opportunity, in what could prove to be a rich ground for future study.

INTRODUCTION

The first comic book was published over eight decades ago and since then, the comic book industry has grown into a multi-million dollar money-maker that informs/inspires other industries: television, film, traditional book publishing, merchandising, and events (e.g. Comic Con and FanExpo to name a few). However, comic books continue to carry the stigma of being puerile and un-intellectual, and a readers are often derided for taking delight in material that is too often relegated to the children’s section of libraries and bookstores. Although this view is changing slowly and comic book content is increasingly being considered worthy of academic study, very little research has been conducted into the information seeking behaviour of adult readers of comic books. As a life-long, self-identified “comic book nerd” I believe we are a group that has been largely ignored by LIS professionals – both as research subjects and users of library systems/collections – an omission that I hope to redress by conducting this study into the information seeking habits of comic book enthusiasts. As reading is a solitary act and the choosing of reading material highly individualized, I hope to discover: what resources, if any, this topic population utilizes when seeking information about comic books; whether gender and age influences behaviour; whether the information seeking behaviour resembles any model(s) in particular; and the best ways to meet information (and acquisition) needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adult readers of comic books are not particularly well represented in LIS literature. Of late, there has been more interest, both mainstream and academic, in comics, but at the moment there is a dearth of scholarly research into the information behaviours of comic book readers. As a such, for the purpose of this study it was necessary to seek out research that either explained this lack and/or examined a topic/population that shared similar information behaviours with comic book readers.

Kari and Hartel’s research into information behaviour and the higher things in life (2009) was essential in explaining why the information behaviours of comic book readers may not be on the radar of information scientists. Their assertion that “The informational facets of higher things in life have been largely ignored even in the field of information research itself” (p 1136) suggests that any information behaviours that take place around activities that are either “pleasurable or profound” have not been seriously considered as deserving of study. If fiction reading, which falls within the purview of the pleasurable, has received this treatment until recently, then it comes as no surprise that the information seeking habits of comic books readers have received even less attention.

Lee and Trace’s study of hobbyist collectors (2009) proved useful in that even though comic book collectors are not such a rare breed as rubber duck enthusiasts, both groups deal with the pervasive stigmas that their interests are for children. The other similarity lies in the importance both communities place on expertise, or what Lee and Trace call ‘knowledge interest’, which “refers to how collectors talk

about growing their knowledge of rubber ducks or of amassing more information.” (p 628)

Finally, Ooi and Liew’s study of fiction readers and their information behaviours was incredibly relevant as there were a number of parallels to be drawn between these groups but the idea that fiction readers carry out information searching as a part of their everyday routine rang particularly true of comic book readers as well:

Fiction books were selected as part of everyday life information seeking, influenced by participants’ personal characteristics and circumstances, as well as sources in their everyday lives which typically included family, friends, book club and mass media. (764)

While conducting the literature review it became apparent that even though there was a lack of material about comic book readers in particular, furthering research into the information behaviours of comic books readers would build on existing studies about pleasurable leisure activities and fill a gap in LIS literature.

RESEARCH METHODS

Methodology

The Information Horizon Interview (Sonnenwald, 2001) was used to gather data for this research project. This method is meant to “capture certain types of data, which have not been traditionally included in studies of information-seeking behaviour” (Sonnenwald, 2001, p.191). Like the original study, I hoped to capture “when and why people access (and do not access) individuals and other information resources; relationships among information resources; the proactive nature of information resources; and the impact of contexts and situations on the information-seeking process.” (ibid) In this method, subjects “provide a graphical and verbal articulation of their information horizon in a particular context” (ibid) during a semi-structured interview. For the interview I created a guide (Appendix 1), that acted as a script to keep the discussion on track and ensure that I asked all participants all the pertinent questions.

Participants

Participants were chosen very carefully, with an eye to representing the growing diversity of the larger community. It would have been preferable to interview an equal number of men and women, but the constraints of the study did not allow for this. For ethical reasons, subjects were over the age of 18 and as age was a sensitizing concept, participants in different decades of their lives were invited to participate. My first interviewee, Wade Wilson, is a university educated cis-

straight white man in his early 40s, who identifies as an old school comic book nerd. He is married and has two daughters in their early teens. My second interviewee, Shuri, holds a Masters of Education, identifies herself as a black queer femme and is in her mid 20s. She is very interested in how various identities are represented in comic books. My third interviewee, Clint Barton, also holds a Masters of Education. He is a cis-straight white man in his early 30s, married, and identifies as a Swedish-Peruvian comic book nerd.

FINDINGS

Interview 1: Wade Wilson

Wade Wilson has been reading comics for such a long time that initially, he couldn’t remember when he picked up his first comic book. He believes he “was around 7 or 8” but remembered quite clearly that he literally “stumbled into them” at a cigar store in a local mall. Wilson is the archetypal comic book nerd: a lone wolf who trusts his own knowledge/preferences and doesn’t play well with others. He has his regular hunting grounds (The Beguiling 1A, and the Silver Snail, 1B) but his social interactions in these information rich environments are minimal to none, as he doesn’t trust or value the opinions of clerks, who are “only trying to sell me things” or friends, who have very different tastes than he does and whom he considers “amateurs”. Once he is interested in a title, he is loyal to it, reading as many back issues as he can procure. If he exhausts this material and needs something new to read, he browses the racks, looking to the comic books themselves, scanning the covers until he sees something interesting, then picking it up and reading a few pages to see if it grabs his interest.

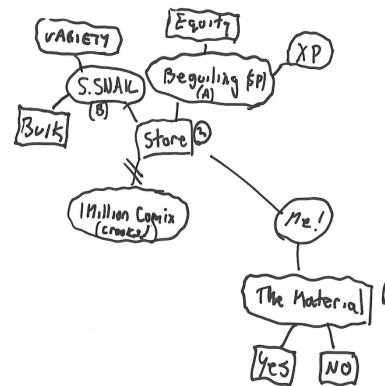


Figure 1. Information Horizon Map, Wade Wilson

Interview 2: Shuri

Shuri also stumbled into reading comics, when she chanced upon a box of old Archie comics in her aunt's basement. Growing up in a Jehovah's Witness household, Shuri "wasn't allowed to read comics really, so I'd go over to her [aunt's] house and be like, 'F**k, yeah! I get to read awesome things!'" As a teenager, Shuri stopped reading comic books, as she felt that the mainstream offerings of Marvel and DC had such a long history attached to them that she would never be able to catch up and "the boys' club" who held the knowledge about these series presented a sizable roadblock. This outsider situation changed significantly once Shuri started working at an independent bookstore – here she was in an information rich environment, where she could search databases (BookManager, 1), publisher catalogues, and receive recommendations from co-workers and customers. Shuri is comfortable using Internet resources to find information about comic books: she follows artists on Instagram (2), where she can browse covers and artwork; and Facebook groups (3) where she finds recommendations from other readers who share her interest in Afro-Futurism. She says that her experience with information resources, whether in real life (IRL) or online is often like "falling down the rabbit hole".

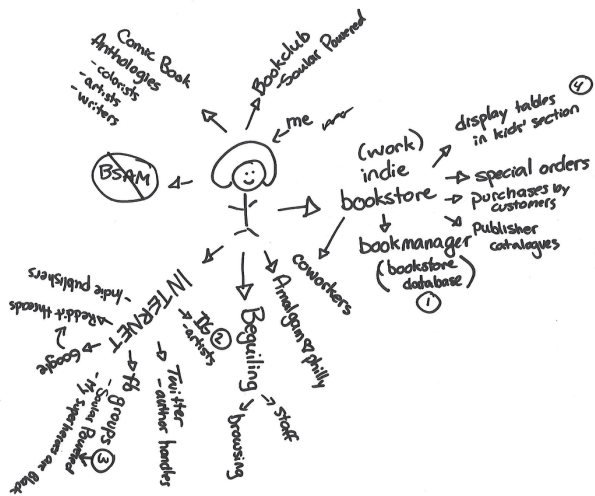


Figure 2. Information Horizon Map, Shuri

Interview 3: Clint Barton

Clint Barton estimates that he started reading comics when he was 8 or 9. Barton says that his interest in comics most likely started because he was "walking distance from a strip mall

and some convenience stores that had them on racks and I was just naturally curious at that point after seeing them so many times." Having read X-Men exclusively for many years, while at university, a confluence of events led him to what would become his favourite series of all time: on campus he noticed "some nerds" carrying "Hellboy lunchboxes" and as it was around the time that [Guillermo] "del Toro's film [an adaptation of the comic book] was coming out" he headed to the store and bought the first volume. Barton relies on a combination of online and IRL resources to keep his information current, social media (1) being his primary source. He follows writers on Twitter for news about upcoming releases and recommendations and like Shuri, uses an image heavy platform (in this case on Tumblr), so he can view cover and other artwork. Clint is a former employee of the same independent bookstore (2) as Shuri, and his wife currently works at another of their stores. He often stops by to browse the shelves. Though his "bookstore friends" offer recommendations that he sometimes takes up, Clint states that most of his informational interactions in the store are what he calls "accidental bookstore encounters."

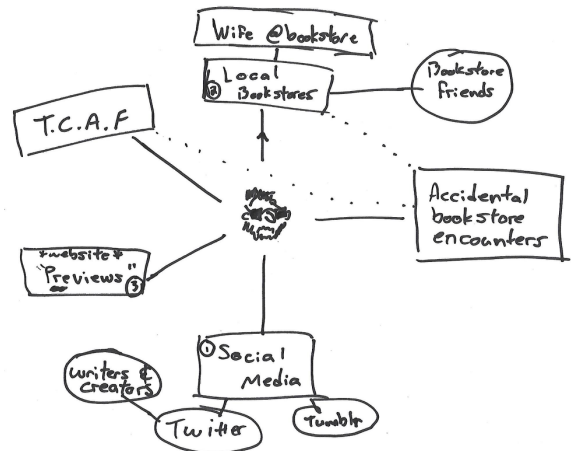


Figure 3. Information Horizon Map, Clint Barton

DISCUSSION

Much like Lee and Trace, my "goal was not to attempt any grand or overarching theorizing but rather to discern patterns" (2009, p. 624). That said, it felt important to have some "boundaries", which is why I chose gender and age as sensitizing concepts. However, when evidence of information encountering (Erdelez, 1999) and finding without seeking (Ross, 1999) emerged amongst all three participants, it was not surprising.

All three subjects showed strong indications of information encountering and shared "a memorable experience of an unexpected discovery of useful or interesting information." (25) All three spoke of the "accidental" or "serendipitous" nature of their information encounters and once they became

serious readers of comic books who frequented information rich physical environments, the likelihood of these encounters fulfilling their information needs became more likely. With regard to information encountering and the Internet, two of the participants, Shuri and Clint, found it to be an important resource and ranked it highly. Wade, on the other hand, did not. Wade's opposition to the Internet as an information resource may have to do with his age – his preferred routine for finding comic books was established long before the arrival of the Internet – or he may be similar to the pleasure readers in Ross's 1999 study who felt that "Recommendations are important, but only from a trusted source with tastes known to be compatible" (p. 789). Wade's process of flipping through a comic book to determine its suitability also resembled pleasure readers who "put book(s) through a series of tests and filters." (p. 791)

Though the interviewees are moving in and through social rich with information resources, unless they are employed at such a site, they tend to dip in and out of these environments; they are transients who come and go as satisfies their information and acquisition needs. In this way, the participants seem quite different from the the rubber duck enthusiasts, who found delight and validation in their social interactions with other members of their community (Lee & Trace, 2009). For Wade, Shuri and Clint, it is the act of reading comic books that makes them members of a wider community; not the social interactions that they might have while information seeking/comic acquiring.

The findings of this study have implications for LIS professionals, especially libraries with comic book collections. If libraries wish to improve services to comic book readers they should start by improving reference interviews. Trust is essential to all fiction readers (Ooi & Liew, 2011, p. 758) but perhaps even more essential to those who read comic books, as those at the level our the participants have considerable knowledge interest (Lee & Trace, 2009, p. 628) and will avoid/disdain those they consider less knowledgeable. Though it is not expected that all librarians should become experts, it is necessary to show comic book readers that a recommendation request will not be met with a generic response. An awareness of comic book readers' preference for discovering new comics suggests that cataloguing (not the kids' section!) shelving and display should be given greater consideration, and allow for prime encountering possibilities.

A lack of research into the information seeking behaviour of comic book readers should be seen as an opportunity to explore new research fronts. A logical next step would be to build on Fisher's work on information ground (2005), observing readers in the kind of information rich environments (both online and physical) readers like Shuri and Clint utilize.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

There was little resistance from the participants when they were told they would have to draw an IHI map and talk about it as they did so. Though none of them are artists, perhaps their love for a medium that features sequential art and text afforded them a level of comfort not experienced by those who do not read comics. When using this method, it is important to consider the skills of the interviewer: if they are not particularly adept at asking probing and follow up questions (and refocusing the attention of an enthusiastic interviewee out on a tangent), then a carefully constructed interview guide is recommended in order to capture rich data. There were no ethical issues raised: all participants were consenting adults who admitted that they would not have minded if their true identities were used. In the end, they conceded that anonymity was best if only to protect their friends, family and co-workers, who had not given their consent to participate.

CONCLUSION

The research question at the heart of this study was "what information resources do adult readers of super hero/costumed comic books use?" Though no meta-theory was used to explore the question, sensitizing concepts of gender and age were applied. It was difficult to draw any definitive conclusions about the impact gender and age had on the information seeking behaviour of comic book readers: on the one hand, Shuri admitted that she thought male comic book readers often acted as gatekeepers to resources and comic book knowledge; on the other, Shuri and Clint, who were of an age to have both grown up with computers, shared more similarities in resource use than Clint and Wade. Increasing the sample size of the study, interviewing an equal number of male and female participants and more than one representative per age group, might shed more light on this question.

Erdelez's information encountering and Ross's finding without seeking proved true as models: comic book readers experience happy accidents when browsing their local bookstore or Facebook chat group and this is a pleasurable and profound leisure activity that occurs in the midst of a reader's everyday life (Kari & Hartel, 2009). Like the other higher things in life, there is no real negativity or problem attached to the information seeking behaviour related to this activity. Though life-long comic book readers may seem a little self-contained (and judgmental), which may present a challenge to LIS professionals who wish to study or engage with them, we must resist the urge to treat this population like Kryptonite.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

Kimberly Trusty is a MLIS student in the Faculty of Information, at the iSchool, University of Toronto. An employee of the Toronto Public Library, her areas of interest include Young Adult Literature, Graphic Novels, and diverse voices in all genres.

APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

1. The Life of a Comic Book Reader

How old were you when you started reading comic books?

How did you become interested in comic books?

What kind of comic books do you read?

-favourite series?

-favourite character?

-genres? (super hero, biographical, sci-fi, fantasy, fictional but reality based)

-creators?

-publishers? (Marvel, DC, Image, Dark Horse, Indie)

-format? (hard copy, digital >> Hoopla, library overdrive)

2. Information Practices

You're tired of your old favourites. Please tell me about how you go about finding a new title to read (you can call on past experiences or think of a totally new way).

3. Information Resources

What resources do you use in determining what comics you read?

-Internet

-blogs?

-social media?

-“experts”? (employees of comic book stores, book stores, friends, fandom, creators etc.)

4. Information Horizon Map/Graphical Elicitation

One other thing that we're trying in this study is that we're asking people if they could draw what we're referring to as their information horizon or information horizon map: to put yourself on this piece of paper, and then draw in the people and other resources that you typically access when you're seeking information about comic books. And if you could indicate which ones you might get to first, or you could go to simultaneously, or which ones you prefer – and talk about it as you're drawing it.

Follow-up to Drawing Exercise

Do you use any other resources?

When, or why, would you go to this particular resource after/before going to this other one?

Do any of these resources proactively provide you with information? Or suggest other information resources to you.

Previously, you mentioned XYZ resource. Would you include them/it on your information horizon? Where? Or, why not?

APPENDIX 2

Wade Wilson's Best Quotes

1)

KT: Ok, well outside of the Snail, none of your other friends were into comic books? Like there was never any exchange about what you were reading?

WW: Nah. I mean... uh. I knew a couple of guys who were like, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna go buy some comics too" and I'd be like, "Yeah! Let's go hit the comic book store, let's go!" And y'know, they'll pick up something but they, they weren't into it the way I was. They were casual. Y'know what I mean? Am-a-teurs. They didn't take it seriously. They didn't know what it was about. Yeah, there was definitely a level of elitism, snobbery.

2)

KT: How are you going to find out about new comics? Or about comics you haven't read? And will it look any different to how it looked when you were a kid and a teenager?

WW: It's gonna sound really stupid but it's going to be exactly what it was, uhm... I wouldn't go online and start looking up stuff because there's so much bias out there anyways and marketing has gotten so sophisticated... that... I don't want to get suckered in like that again, you know what I mean? I'd much rather get the experience of walking in, handling the books, y'know, yeah, give it a quick flip, see if this is something that looks right to me. You don't get that with an electronic comic book I like having the book in my hand. I like flipping through the pages...

Shuri's Best Quotes

1)

KT: So how does working at a bookstore contribute to your information seeking?

S: Going through [publisher] catalogues, mainly TBH. And just like, seeing what other people [customers] are ordering. A lot of special orders come in and I'm like, "Fuck! Where did you find that?" and I write them down, literally just write them down and put the scraps of paper in my pocket and I do research and then of course it leads you down a worm hole on the Internet about like what other people [creators] are doing. Anthologies. Comic book anthologies are brilliant for like content and like who is creating and where they're creating out of because sometimes these really small publishers or independent publishers are just churning out some dope stuff... once they get some funding it's like back to back stuff. Uh, yeah. So catalogues, special orders, specifically and then if

I'm following a certain story I'll just check the... like Image is like a thing, uhm, like I just check their website.

2)

KT: And when do you Google? Like when you're looking for something in particular? Or when you're like, "I have some ideas about something"...

S: Both. So let's say I finished World of Wakanda and I really want to know what other like, comic books are dealing with African mythology... like are their gods and goddesses that are being woven in.. uhm and even like, age ranges, I want comic books that cater to middle school ages. So that's what it is or sometimes if I've just finished a series, like what are people doing and saying and reading around this comic? What are they reading next?

Clint Barton's Best Quotes

1)

KT: How do you find out about new comics?

CB: I would say it's a combination of sources. I have a lot of friends in the bookstore industry, so some of these people give me recommendations. My wife still works at the bookstore, so she'll tell me about something or I'll see something in the store when I stop by to see her and I'll browse the shelves. I follow some of these writers on Twitter, on social media and it's not uncommon for them to recommend other titles, other writers and that works out for me also. Sometimes I'll just pull something off the shelf. Something I find interesting. A lot of my more alternative favourites have come from accidents like that. So it's either like bookstore sources or writers or social media or TCAF. [The Toronto Comics Arts Festival is an annual event curated by Toronto Public Library. It plays host to a plethora of comic book writers, graphic designers, web comic creators etc. over a weekend.] I might look up one or two people specifically but what I usually do is bring a pocket full of cash and just wander the floor for a couple of hours and see what I see. I try to have faith in the event, that it will show me something awesome and I'll have fun.

2)

KT: What about events like FanExpo? What do you think of them as a potential information resource?

CB: I've been a few times. I never went there to find comics though, which is the weird thing. Like, there might be collected volumes there that would be nice to have but with the helpfulness of my local bookstore and the advent of the Internet, I didn't need to go to FanExpo to get that done. I went mainly for the other pop culture material and the interesting sights you could see down there. More entertainment than a resource.

APPENDIX 3

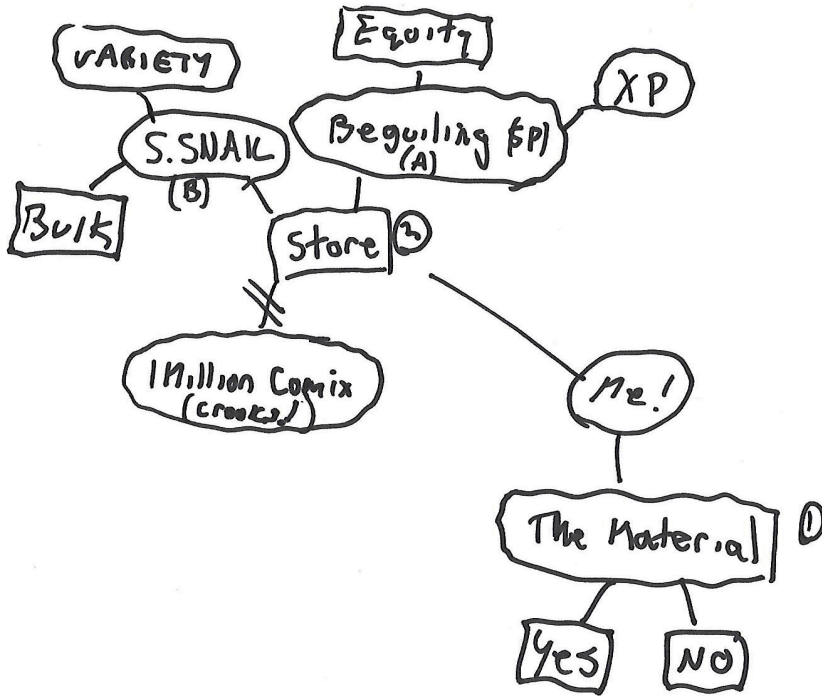


Figure 1. Enlarged Information Horizon Map, Wade Wilson

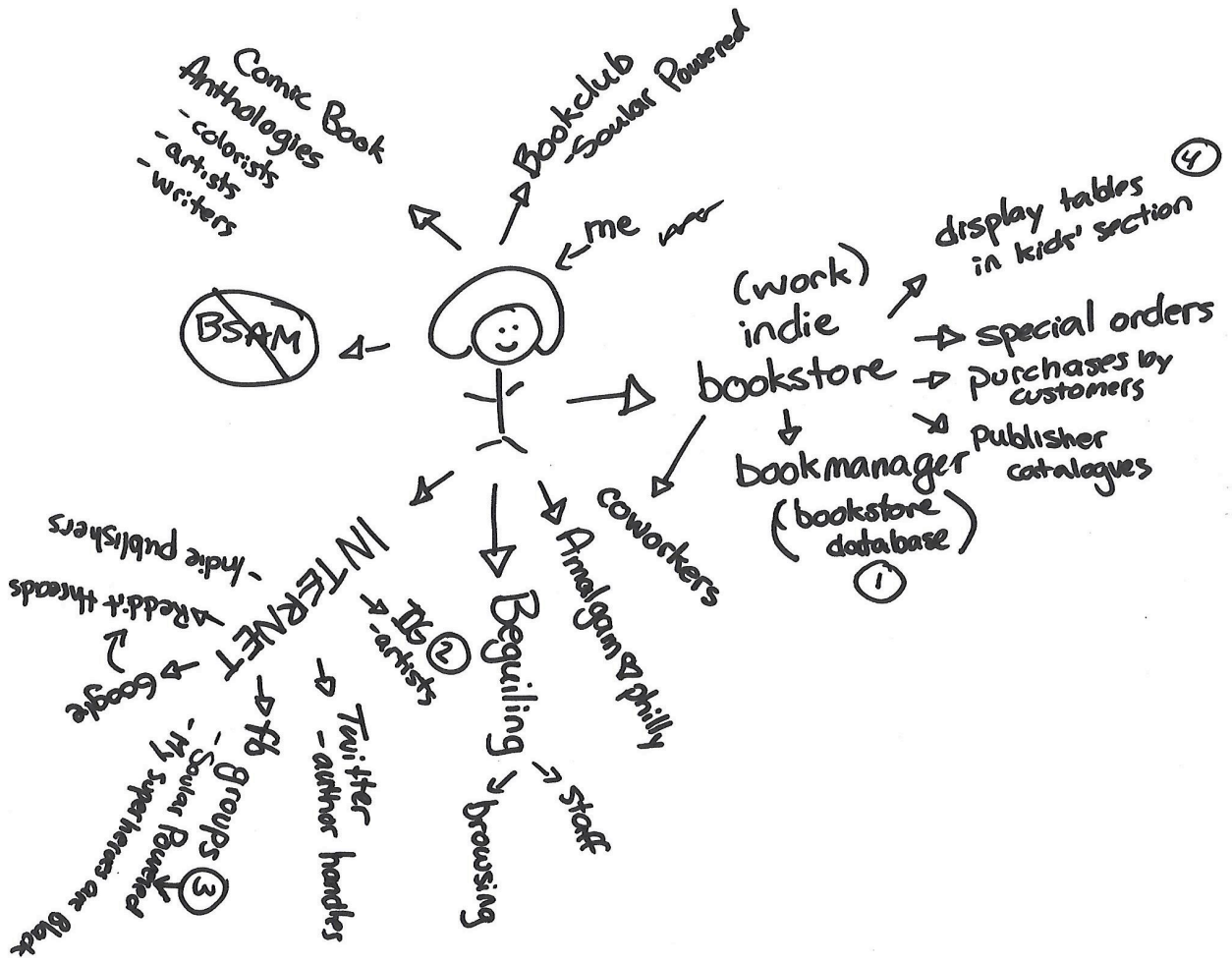


Figure 2. Enlarged Information Horizon Map, Shuri

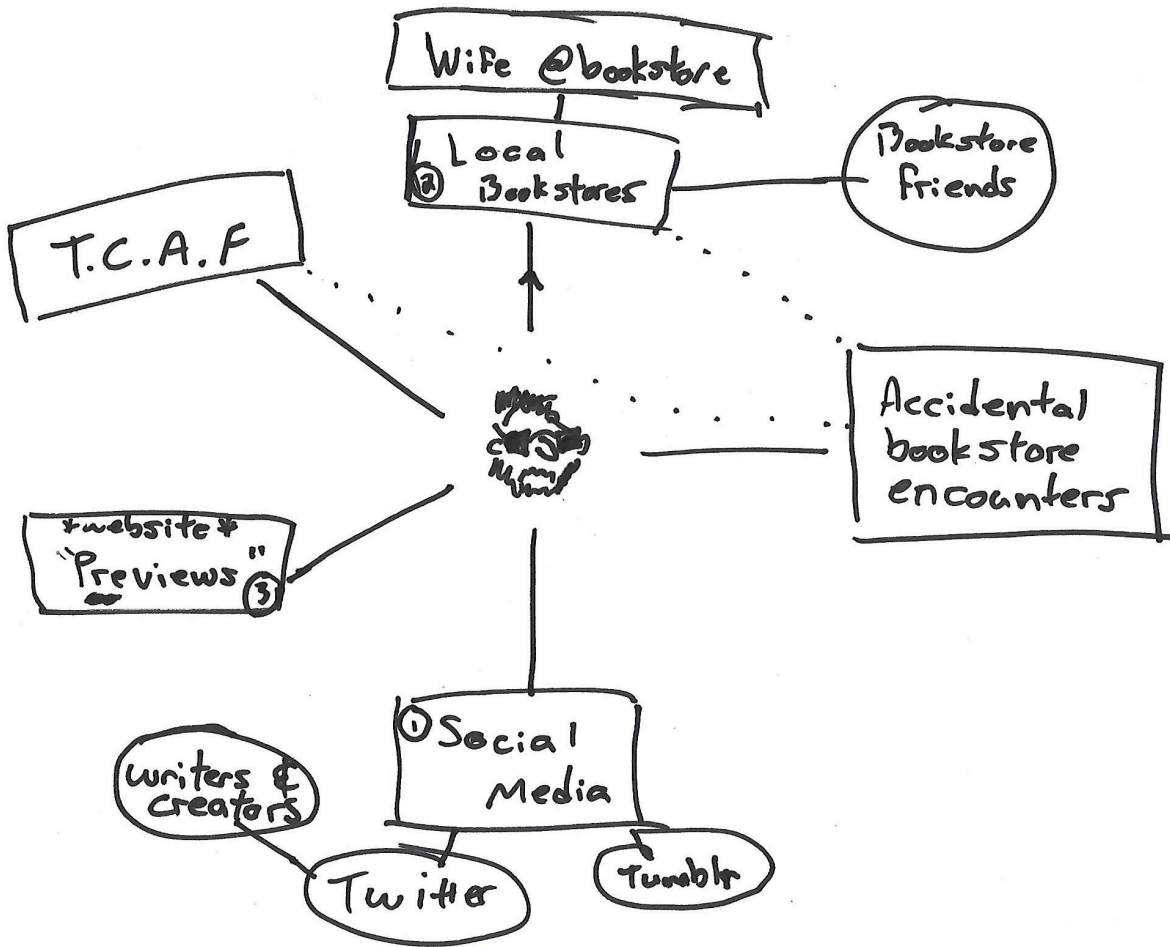


Figure 2. Enlarged Information Horizon Map, Clint Barton