

Signal Processors: The Information Behaviours of Experimental Improvising Musicians

Hannah M. Brown
University of Toronto iSchool
Hannah.brown@mail.utoronto.ca

Abstract

This research project explores the information behaviours of experimental improvising musicians while they create, find spaces to perform, and engage in their community, by examining key themes and applying these themes to theories in the information science literature. The data for this paper was collected using the Information Horizon Interview method (Sonnenwald, 2005) to interview three subjects. Through these interviews, I identified three key findings: these musicians use information encountering in their daily lives as artistic inspiration, they use performances and performance spaces as key places to find and share information, and they seek out community-based learning and information acquisition instead of following the typical hierarchal teacher/student model of music learning. These findings relate to Erdelez's (1999) concept of information encountering, Hektor's (2001) theory of information activities, and Fisher's (2005) study of information grounds. The aim of this paper is to present these findings and encourage further study of musician populations whose work exists outside of the more widely studied university composition or classical music contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In my own artistic practice, I engage in many typical information behaviours; I read books, find online articles, take notes, and seek out information about technical processes and where and how to disseminate my work. I treat creating as a form of research. Thinking about how I use information in my creative process led me to wonder about the processes of other musicians, particularly those who present their work in a spontaneous manner and are highly focused on live performance. These interests led me to my research question for this study: what role does information play in improvised performances of experimental musicians?

I chose to keep the focus of my study small by using non-professional experimental music as a cutting point in order to ensure that there were sufficient similarities between the individuals studied to analyze the data effectively. There is a rich history and current practice of improvisation in traditional jazz, classical, and pop music contexts, all of which I believe have very different contexts and practices which would make comparing individual musicians difficult.

The data I collected from information horizon interviews with members of the experimental improvisation community in Toronto led me to several key themes in the information behaviours of this demographic. For these musicians, information serves as a key source of inspiration and they

are constantly and intentionally encountering and sharing multiple types of information in their day to day lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information behaviour studies related to music performance and composition practices are few and far between. Most studies in the LIS literature which focus on music use music scholars and classical music performers as subjects, and thus do not discuss the roles information plays in the creative process. I found no studies written about improvising musicians specifically, but there have been studies into the creative process of musicians, and two studies performed on composers.

Lavranos et al.'s (2015) framework for analyzing information behaviour in the creative process of musicians synthesizes Wilson's information seeking model and Webster's creative thinking model. Their model begins with a clear impetus for engaging in creative work which, while it is likely present for many composers, is not necessarily clear for improvising experimental musicians. The model also seems to be skewed in general towards classical musicians; it is focused on intentional seeking of information, often within the context of a music library or other academic source, which are likely not used much by non-professional performers.

Hunter (2007) conducted a study on the information behaviours of electroacoustic composers in the context of their library use while in graduate school. In this study, Hunter found that his informants' primary information needs

were technical (related to software or hardware or to instruments the composer did not have experience with) which were usually met at the library or online, and aesthetic needs (inspiration or ideas), which were primarily met using collaborative processes such as discussions with supervisors, friends, and peers.

Eaglestone et al. (2007) also used electroacoustic composers as subjects in their study on information needs in the creative process. This study focuses primarily on the relationship between the technologies being utilized by the musicians and their creative process. The findings of this study included that the creative process often involved discovery of new materials as opposed to intentional searching for them, that composers often took ‘breaks’ from their work to seek out inspiration in other places, and that various aspects of software development, availability, and knowledge had profound effects on the creative processes of the individuals studied.

These studies, though relevant in specific musical contexts, do not represent the experiences of improvising musicians who operate outside of the context of university, professional, or classical music settings.

RESEARCH METHODS

To gather data for this study, I utilized Sonnenwald’s (2005) Information Horizon Interview framework. An information horizon consists of a complex series of actors, sources and their relationships with each other within both individual and social situations. In Sonnenwald’s framework, subjects are tasked with drawing an information horizon map about a specific context after engaging in an oral interview. After asking my participants a series of questions relating to three aspects of improvised performing which I used as sensitizing concepts (information gathering for inspiration, collaborative information gathering, and logistical information gathering), I asked them to draw themselves on a sheet of paper and then draw their information horizon based on their most recent performance experience.

My study involved three informants who will be referred to in this paper as Subject A, Subject B, and Subject C. All three subjects are actively performing musicians based in the city of Toronto whose work is primarily based on experimental improvisation. Subjects A and C are female and in their twenties, and Subject B is male and in his thirties. Subjects A and B are involved in experimental jazz and both play the saxophone, and Subject C works mostly with electronics. All three subjects have ‘day jobs’, and they consider performing to be a key aspect of their lives and identities.

The informants for this study have been kept anonymous and key identifying information has been removed in order to protect their privacy.

FINDINGS

To analyse the data I collected for this research, I have chosen to use thematic analysis. Though each of my subjects gave very different responses on the surface, I was able to pinpoint a few key themes that cropped up in all three interviews, and I believe that these themes may be applicable to many musicians in similar fields. Using these themes organizes the data collected effectively without oversimplifying it or trying to fit it into an existing model meant for a different demographic or information seeking process.

Information Encountering as Inspiration

For all three of my subjects, information gathering was essentially inspiration for their work. When I approached them with the concepts of information behaviour to explain the purpose of my research, they began almost immediately referring to ‘inspiration’. The ways in which these musicians find this inspiration/information was rarely a measured, goal-driven process. Instead, these subjects engaged in a process of encountering; constantly finding and collecting bits of information in their daily lives and applying that knowledge to their arsenal of ideas. Subject C specifically identified herself on her IH map as a ‘multi-thread processor’ of information (see Fig. 1). Key sources of information identified by the subjects included relationships with family and friends, their ‘day jobs’, dreaming, pleasure reading, and academic work.

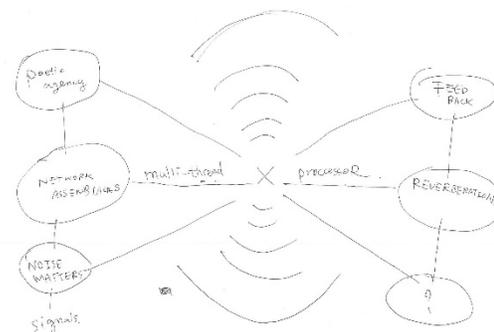


Figure 1. Subject C’s IH Map

The Gig as an Information Resource

For all three of the subjects interviewed, the performance venue was a key space for accessing multiple types of information. Subjects A and B explicitly stated that they found new collaborators by simply ‘hanging around’, explaining that people who attend their performances tend to be other creative types. Subject B was even able to find a

last-minute substitute for a band mate by meeting a player at a show.

Subject A pointed out that venues were key community spaces for improvising musicians. She stated that the way she usually found new shows to see or events to play at were through the venues she followed on social media and attended regularly. Subject B had similar experiences, pointing out that his practice within the city of Toronto is primarily based around a single venue which is, for him, a space for expression, collaboration, discussion, and inspiration.

All three subjects said that their main source of feedback or reviews on their performances was talking to the audience after a gig. Subject A specifically identified going outside to smoke and chat with other smokers as a key source of information about how her performances went. Even though she does not necessarily ask those around her, the subject comes up over the course of casual conversation. All the subjects considered feedback to be vital information for their creative processes. Subject B explained that when he is in the moment and performing, he does not necessarily ‘hear’ everything that is going on. He thus highly values and trusts the experiences of others when they express feelings or critiques about a show.

The Search for the ‘New’

One of the most interesting findings of my interviews was the ways in which the subjects use ‘music-specific information’. This information includes technical knowledge of playing an instrument, theoretical knowledge, historical knowledge, listening to music, or engaging in academic study in music. Since my subjects were involved in experimental projects, I was particularly interested in how traditional music teaching/learning information frameworks may fit into their processes.

All three of my subjects had traditional musical training in the past. Subjects A and B attended University and studied music (interestingly, both A and B immediately drew themselves holding their instrument, see Fig. 2), and Subject C had intensive classical piano training throughout her childhood. All three subjects expressed a desire to ‘forget’ or ‘leave behind’ the information they learned in these institutions and instead learn how to improve their music in a non-hierarchical community system. Subject C had a particularly interesting relationship with her piano training. She said that as a child she hated having to engage in repetitive practice routines, so in her current practice she never plays with the same set up twice. She seeks out new sounds by engaging in what she describes as ‘tools’ (instruments, new software materials) in a spontaneous and embodied manner, concentrating on how she feels about the instrument instead of utilizing the traditional mentor/student classical music model.



Figure 2. Subject A's IH Map

DISCUSSION

The information behaviours that all three subjects engaged in to find inspiration can be linked to Erdelez's work on information encountering. Each subject described their process as being heavily influenced by their day-to-day lives and activities. In Erdelez's (1999) terms, these subjects would be considered ‘super-encounterers’. They recognize the key role that encountering information plays in their work. Both types of information encountering as described by Erdelez are present in the data of this study. All three subjects encounter information purely by chance, and Subject C mentioned encountering inspiration often while searching for information for her MFA thesis.

The general information seeking behaviours of my subjects in this study can also be linked to Hektor's (2001) concept of information activities. The key activities which relate strongly to the data collected are dressing, exchanging, and unfolding. The performance acts as the primary place for dressing activity; the performer has taken in and processed thoughts, emotions, and other information and then expresses the completed product in the form of music. All three subjects expressed in their interviews that their primary goal in performing is to relay a synthesized idea or emotional state extracted from the experiences of their lives to the audience.

The subjects engaged regularly in the process of unfolding information. All of them stressed the importance of community, conversation, and experiencing the work of others. Subject B in particular discussed how he always had ideas and concepts for new pieces ‘floating around in the back of his mind’ which he then developed over time by encountering, processing, and expanding on information to relate it to those ideas.

Exchanging activity takes place between musicians and the audience, musicians and collaborators, and between non-performing audience members. Subjects A and B both prominently featured both the audience and other musicians in their IH maps, and Subjects A and C stated that absorbing

new ideas from others was the key to overcoming creative difficulties or ‘blocks’.

The gig as an important space for information seeking and processing relates to Fisher’s (2005) work on ‘information grounds’. In line with the literature on information grounds, the gig is a temporal space where like-minded individuals tend to congregate and converse casually about a variety of topics (Fisher, 2005). My subjects discussed sharing a variety of formal, informal, professional and non-professional information at gigs, such as debriefings of the performance with friends and audience members, meeting other musicians to collaborate with, arranging future performances, and discussing other music topics not related to the performance. Fisher (2005) states that one of the key characteristics of an information ground is that ‘social interaction is the primary activity’, which is certainly true in this context.

Investigating the information behaviours of improvisors may have wide-reaching implications for how music is typically taught and researched. Teaching improvisation is notoriously difficult and highly subjective. A better understanding of how information seeking and sharing fits into these creative processes may allow for new avenues in teaching musicians how to engage in improvisation and for musicologists to study its practice. These findings could also be used by music libraries to attempt to encourage improvising musicians or composers to utilize their collections in their information journeys.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Utilizing the IHI method was an interesting experience for me, as I have done ethnographic research in the past using interview-only methods. I found that the subjects I interviewed were a bit uncomfortable with the process. Two out of three subjects were very concerned and preoccupied with their drawing ability. I found that the subjects needed quite a bit of guidance through the process, as they weren’t sure how to visualize their information processes and seemed much more comfortable talking through it during the interview. With these particular subjects, the diagrams were rather difficult to analyze meaningfully, as the subjects tended to get off topic in their drawings and were very unsure of themselves while they drew. I do not believe that this is necessarily true of the IHI process as a whole, but for my subjects I feel like a longer, more in-depth verbal interview paired with observation of gigs may have resulted in more data.

CONCLUSION

The information behaviours of artists and creative processes in specific contexts is an immensely rich, yet rarely explored, area of research. In my study of experimental improvisational musicians, I was able to see how creative

individuals seek, synthesize, and perceive information and how it shapes their work as performers.

The musicians I interviewed each had a different performance style and aesthetic sound, but they also had a surprising number of similar themes in their information behaviours. They are constantly encountering from a vast variety of sources in their lives, which they then synthesize into a spontaneous emotional experience. They often equated information with inspiration. They engaged regularly in collaborative information practices including sharing, debriefing, networking, and finding places to perform. All three participants identified the gig as the key space where these collaborative processes take place. At gigs they get in-person reviews of their performances and meet new collaborators from among the crowd. They all are striving for ideas and sounds that are completely new, abandoning (or attempting to abandon) the traditional hierarchical structures of their formal musical training.

Studying the information behaviours involved in creativity and finding outlets and communities for that creativity can help us better understand how we, as information professionals, can foster creativity in our communities.

REFERENCES

- Eaglestone, B., Ford, N., Brown, G., Moore, A. (2007). Information systems and creativity: An empirical study. *Journal of Documentation*, 63(4), 443–464.
- Erdelez, S. (1999). Information Encountering: It’s more than just bumping into information. *American Society for Information Science*, 25(3), 26-29.
- Fisher, K. (2005). Information ground. In K. Fisher, S. Erdelez, & L. McKechnie (Eds.), *Theories of information behavior: A researcher’s guide* (pp. 185-190). Medford, NJ: Information Today.
- Hektor, A. (2001). *What’s the use: Internet and information behavior in everyday life*. Linköping: Linköping University.
- Hunter, B. (2007). A new breed of musicians: The information-seeking needs and behaviors of composers of electroacoustic music. *Music Reference Services Quarterly*, 10(1), 1-15.
- Lavranos, C., Kostagiolas, P. A., Martzoukou, K., & Papadatos, J. (2015). Music information seeking behaviour as motivator for musical creativity. *Journal of Documentation*, 71(5), 1070-1093.
- Sonnenwald, D.H (2005). Information horizons. In K. Fisher, S. Erdelez, & L. McKechnie (Eds.), *Theories of information behavior: A researcher’s guide* (pp. 191-197). Medford, NJ: Information Today.

AUTHOR'S BIO

Hannah M. Brown (hannah.brown@mail.utoronto.ca) is a Master of Information student at the University of Toronto. She holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Queen's University, where her studies focused on electronic composition and musicology within a technological context. She is also an active sound artist.

APPENDIX 1

Interview Questions:

1. Can you describe generally what kind of improvisational music you are involved with?
2. How do you prepare for or create a typical performance? Can you walk me through your most recent performance?
3.
 - What are the first sources that come to mind when you think of what inspires your work?
 - What role does music-specific information (such as technical training, theory, listening to other music) play in your process?
 - What sources do you use for this information?
 - Do you have formal music training? If so, what effect does it have on your work?
 - What kinds of non-musical things play a role in your creative process? (ie visual art, nature, current events, family)
 - What sources do you use for this information?
 - Do you engage in collaborative processes when you perform? How do you meet new collaborators?
 - Are you part of any communities that share information related to improvisatory music (such as a newsletter or facebook group)?
 - How do you find places and events to perform at?
 - What kinds of sources do you use to arrange a performance?
 - Do you read or seek out comments, reviews, or other audience feedback for your performances?
 - If so, where do you access this feedback?
 - When you are 'stuck' creatively, do you seek out information to get out of the rut?

APPENDIX 2

Q: Do you have any formal music training? If so, what role does that play in your music?

Subject A: "Yes, I went to university and college for music. It's great to be informed by the history of music but a lot of the time I'm trying to unlearn or forget what I've learned when I'm improvising to leave room for something that is truly new and in the moment. When you're reacting, there isn't much time to think.

Sometimes the point is to find the zen balance between thinking and not thinking."

Q: How do you usually meet the people you collaborate with?

Subject B: "...If you like something, and you're going out somewhere and hanging around then you're probably going to be involved somehow. Recently I was looking for a sub for one of my bands and I wasn't sure, then somebody came to the gig, and even though there were other people I could ask, the person that was there ended up being it. It was like, wow that suddenly makes so much sense that I would call that person up to do that job."

Q: Could you go into more detail about the non-musical sources that play into your process?

Subject C: "...I think about information a lot. I see myself as a signal processor, so when improvising I'll see myself processing frequencies that are coming from myself when playing the sounds or coming from the space itself."

Q: Does your academic research play a role in your process?

Subject C: "At first it was inevitable because I'm doing my thesis, I have to read a lot. But my supervisor was a very well-known pianist in Canada and one day he just stopped playing the piano because he hated it and he started writing and became a philosopher. I love reading theories and I think they really inform my practice."

APPENDIX 3

Fig 1. Subject A's IH Map

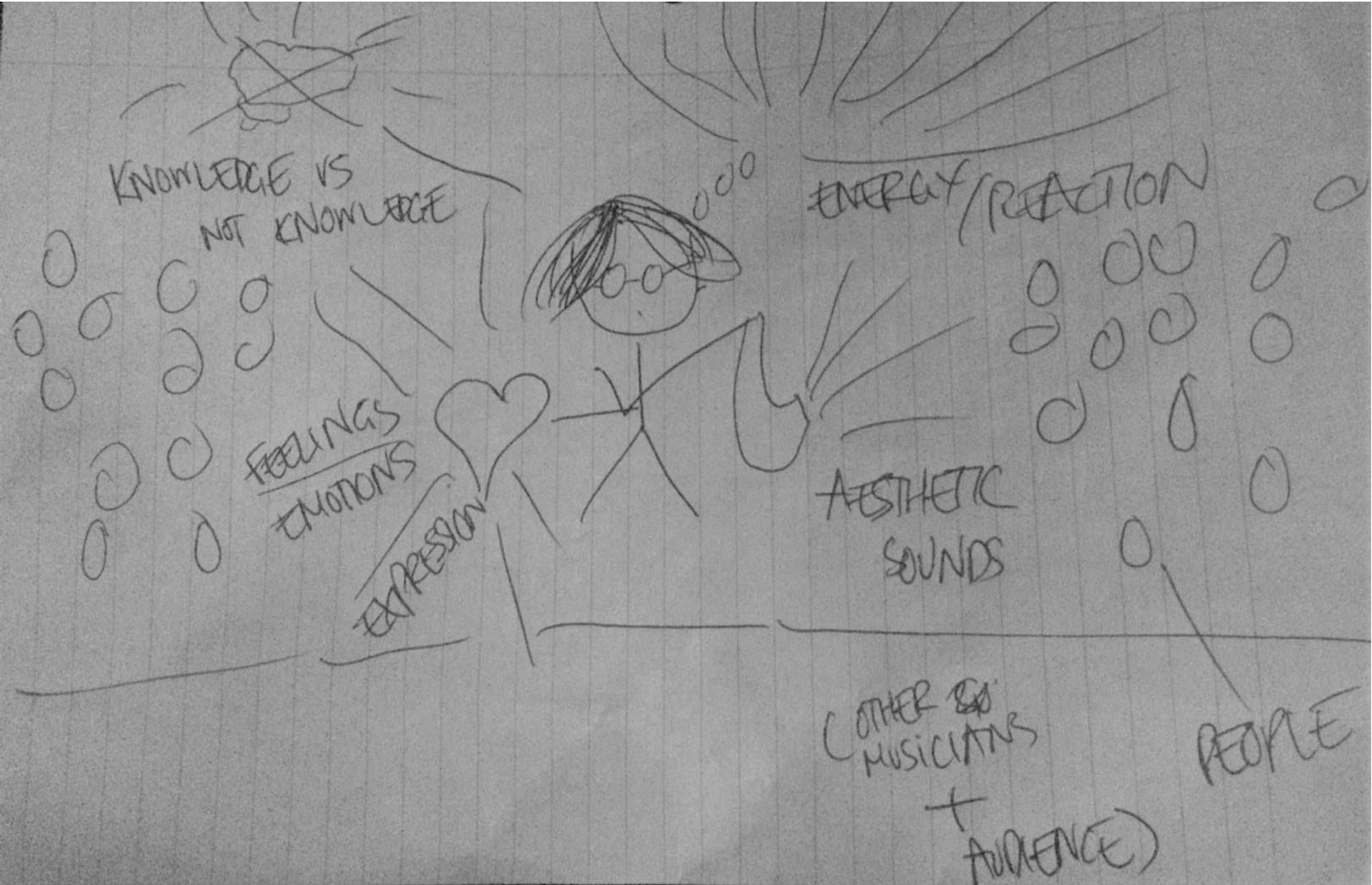


Fig 1. Subject C's IH Map

