

Becoming Informed:

**The Information Practices of Decision-makers in
the Local Sphere**

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Sally Irvine-Smith, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Communication at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

This study examines the practices by which people acquire, generate, share and use knowledge — how they become informed. It asks ‘How do decision-makers in local government get the information on which to base their decisions?’; ‘What are they doing?’

A strongly practice-theoretical approach, coupled with an innovative interview methodology designed to substitute for participant observation, allows the full range of information activities to be identified and examined. Twenty-eight decision-makers from local government have been interviewed: fifteen council officers, seven councillors and six members of a community panel — the latter two groups never before studied in this type of information research. The resulting data provides a rich and vibrant picture of the every-day. A conceptual framework of practice has been developed to provide the lens through which this data is thematically analysed, consisting of seven core principles of practice: action, temporality, situatedness, continuity and recurrence, embodiment, mediation and sociality.

The findings show that any activity performed by a decision-maker can generate knowledge which contributes to the process of deciding. Contrary to much existing research which conceptualises decision-making as a defined process separate from other activities performed by decision-makers, this research finds that decision-making is a routine activity performed in the every-day. The information activities associated with decision-making are, in fact, indistinguishable from other activities. The findings add to a growing body of scholarship acknowledging that decision-making – and its attendant information activities – do not often result from problem situations.

The study introduces the concept of information efficiency: these participants know how best to acquire or generate the information required for their decision-making and do not undertake unnecessary information activities. That they show a preference for people as information sources does not mean they settle for inferior or incomplete information, as is assumed in previous research, but that they know who will have the knowledge to best serve their needs. Becoming informed is a social enterprise and the two-way interaction of conversation itself is an important mechanism by which people become informed.

The research demonstrates that a wide range of activities lead to a person becoming informed, and concludes that analysing every-day activities through a practice lens obviates the need for model-building so prevalent in studies of information behaviour. It shows that the information practices associated with decision-making are normative, situated, social and enacted in the every-day and that knowledge is not the property of any single situation.