Assisting information practice: from information intermediary to digital proxy

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Abstract

Dependence on social media and other online systems as part of everyday life has grown considerably over the years. At the same time, the complexity and security of online systems has also been increasing, making it more challenging for some people to access the services they need. This impacts the information practices of many users, leading to several scenarios where individuals need assistance in information related tasks, from registering for government services to updating social media content.

This poster presents findings from two studies which investigated how individuals who lack the skills to use digital tools and services might seek or be offered support from others including those working in an intermediary or digital proxy role on the account holder's behalf.

Problem statement and research questions

This work considers the relationship between the established concept of information intermediaries and a new concept of digital proxies, which is initially defined here to be "individuals who assist others manage their online information presence". This is done in the context of information behaviour and everyday life information practices. It is comprised of the findings from two studies (informal support for managing digital identity provided by information professionals; proxied management of social media presences for people with dementia) which have helped to identify different issues relevant to the concept of proxies in online environments.

This poster presents the initial findings of these two studies as they relate to four exploratory questions:

1. What are the underlying concepts, and issues with, the term digital proxy?
2. What information practices do digital proxies undertake for the people they support?
3. How is risk and trust handled within the proxy relationship, and in what manner does the proxy relationship change over time?
4. How do proxies and account holders define terms or determine the scope of the help to be provided (e.g. on a practical or legal basis)?

Significance and relevance of the topic

Every stage of an individual's life cycle now has a digital aspect to it and there will be times during an individual's digital life cycle when they have limited capacity to manage their digital presence (e.g. due to age, health, or poor digital literacy) (Moncur, Durrant &

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Martindale, 2014). Information science has a long tradition of studying the role of "information intermediary" (Buchanan, Jardine & Ruthven, 2019; Vitak, Liao, *et al*, 2018), however this has historically focussed on information seeking practices. It is now apparent that there is a need to extend such work to consider the broader information practices of digital proxies in the co-management of an individual's digital identity and online presence (Kaczmarek, Shanker & Nathan, 2019). This includes addressing questions about trust and risk behaviours related to digital information, including digital identities such as online login details (Coles-Kemp & Hansen, 2017; Dourish & Anderson, 2016; Jøsang, Fabre, *et al*, 2005), especially when support is sought from people with whom there is no prior trust relationship in place (e.g. professionals or volunteers at public libraries or computer clubs). An investigation into these issues will help to create better understandings of the role of digital proxies undertake to help keep people safe, maintain social connections, and ensure that people continue to receive vital services benefits (Fiske, Buyx & Prainsack, 2019).

Content

The focus of this work is related to the individuals who act as digital proxies – including information professionals, care workers, volunteers, and family members. This poster presents a summary of findings from the previously mentioned studies and will serve as the initial foundation for a larger investigation related to social digital proxies. It includes the following information:

- A review of definitions contextualising 'digital proxy' in relation to past research in the role of information intermediary and, accounts of human behaviour and everyday information practices. This includes the relationship between the terms 'service user', 'identity', 'trust', and 'proxy' and the ways in which they are used in legal, social, and digital or online contexts.

- An overview of proxy practices in the context of people who assist individuals with limited capabilities or skills, and how they describe their work, from two general forms of proxy relationship:

  (1) Family and friends who act as social media proxies for older adults and people with dementia

  (2) Professionals and other trusted individuals working as proxies through their digital inclusion roles to assist in the creation or management of online accounts for members of the public

- An introduction to a discussion related to a new model of proxy as an everyday information practice, with reference to past literature on information intermediaries, personhood, privacy, identity, and trust.

Conclusion

This is an emerging area of research with implications for the development of wider knowledge around the co-management of online and digital information, self-sovereign identity (Jøsang et al, 2005), improving digital user experiences (Zagouras, Kalloniatis & Gritzalis, 2017), and the development of community-based digital skills training. This work provides a foundation in theorising the role of digital proxies from an information science perspective whilst providing a roadmap for future research in this vital area.

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