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Beyond Belief: Prayer as Communication in Religious Information Seeking

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Abstract: Prayer role in information seeking has been largely neglected in LIS research. I propose that respondents understood prayer as communication with God. I compared their descriptions of prayer to God with research on interpersonal communication for information seeking. Prayer, for these respondents, met both cognitive and affective information needs.
Résumé : Le rôle de la prière dans la recherche d'information est un sujet largement négligé en bibliothéconomie et en science de l'information. L'auteur admet que les répondants perçoivent la prière comme un acte de communication avec Dieu. La description des prières a ensuite été comparée à la recherche sur les communications interpersonnelles dans une optique de recherche d'information. La prière, pour ces répondants, répondait à la fois à des besoins informationnels cognitifs et affectifs.

Introduction

This study grew out of a larger multi-site ethnographic study of information seeking of Atlantic Canadian Christian church leaders. It was observed in the pilot phase of that study that prayer was frequently referred to in interviews about the leaders' information seeking. In this paper I explored both their comments about prayer and, to a lesser extent, their corporate practice of prayer, in order to understand its information-seeking role.

Sociologically, Weber defined prayer as entreaty to gods, analogous to a petitioner approaching a potentate seeking favour through sacrifice or service (1993, 25). Prayer, as communication with the supernatural, is a familiar religious practice for many Canadians. Sociologist Bibby found that 74% of Canadian acknowledged that they pray privately; 28% pray daily (2002, 159-164). Reasons stated for praying included: "source of comfort", "direction" and "relationship" with God and others. As my respondents in this study are evangelical Christians, I will be defining prayer from that theological perspective as "a simple belief that God could be petitioned to intervene and effect changes in nature and in the course of world events" and "allows us to speak of prayer as talking to God" (EDBT, 1996).

Literature Review

In previous studies of clergy IS sources, little attention has been given to the role of prayer (Wicks, 1999; Allen, 1987; Porcella, 1973; Tanner, 1992, 1994; Lancour, 1978; Erdel, 1982). Roland's (2007) study on sermon preparation did however consider collaboration with the Holy Spirit in Scripture selection. The informant described, "being led by the Spirit" and "hearing the Holy Spirit" (137). Kari (2005) has surveyed spirituality and information work, but concluded that "there is no attempt to conceptually relate spiritual development to information phenomena, either: spiritual growth was simply reported in the context of library work." (941) He found references to spirituality / belief in IS research but

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the role of the spiritual remained unclear (945-946). In his own research (2001) Kari considered paranormal IS, but not in religious contexts, and not explicitly prayer in the sense I am using it, though respondents described communication with paranormal beings such as God, angels, spirits, and deceased relatives (96).

Health research has also considered prayer and IS. In cancer studies, prayer was found to be a coping mechanism when information was overwhelming (Leydon at al., 2000). Patients would turn to prayer in the belief that "everything will be alright" (Collins 2008, 336), and unanswered prayer could also be a source of personal conflict (Holt, 2009, 250). However, prayer was sometimes linked directly with information seeking. One cancer survey stated, "I prayed a lot and I asked the Lord to help me and show me what He wanted me to do…(255).

Several LIS studies of Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) have considered people as information sources. Julien and Michels (2000, 2004) found that people were as seen as ideal information sources for "their ability to make judgments and offer informed opinions, to interpersonal qualities such as the ability to empathize or to offer assurance" (2000, 6); "people talk to people when faced with problem or issue in their daily lives" (2000, 8). People met affective as well as instrumental needs; talking to people was convenient but also "enjoyable" (2000, 9) and "it's a social thing to do" (2004, 560). Savolainen (2007) found that the value of human sources was in their ability to filter and interpret information provided by other print, media and digital sources. He noted that, "human sources were also favored since they may provide easy and quick access to information and clarify complicated issues in an interactive way since they may provide immediate feedback." (287) Agosto & Hughes-Hassell (2005) and Given (2002) both found that young people preferred people, particularly family and friends, in ELIS and academic IS for convenience, expertise and socializing. Michels' (2006) study of academic IS concluded that researchers regularly consulted people for judgments that would confirm / affirm their research.

Methodology

The data for this study was extracted from a study of church leaders' IS. It was gathered using participant observation, and interviews. The respondents were leaders of churches in transition. I used an open–ended interviewing technique, with seventeen questions on personal religious information seeking, leaders information seeking, and religious information and technology. For this paper, I analyzed the texts of the five leader interviews using a grounded theory approach. I sought to identify terms such as pray/ prayer/ praying or God/Lord/Jesus combined with terms such as speak/ say/ saying/ talk/ told/ ask/ hear/ heard. I was able to isolate passages for detailed analysis.

Findings

There were twenty-four occurrences of the prayer terms, and references to the "Lord leading", "God saying", "God hears/is hearing", "God is/was telling" and "he says". There were action verbs related to prayer and IS: God "leads", "calls", "places", "wants", "is here", "can be connected". Twenty passages discussed prayer across the five interviews. I applied sixty-eight codes to these occurrences, and identified seven themes: prayer and conflict, prayer as communication, prayer and divine agency, prayer as information,

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importance of prayer, answered prayer, and prayer & Bible study. Prayer in these texts included both personal (3x), and corporate prayer (8x).

One significant observation is that respondents viewed God as personal and communicative. One respondent said, "God is here", and "he hears our prayers." God was viewed as both a passive recipient of prayer and as an active, personal agent. God is described as acting by answering, calling, preventing, and leading.

Respondents described prayer as an important resource (7x), and described the role of prayer in two ways: 1) Prayer was a means of gathering information / a resource, and 2) Prayer assisted in interpretation / discernment / confirmation when evaluating information. Prayer in the first sense was used twice. First, it was associated with Bible study and conversations with others in information gathering. Second, the respondent described how information would come to his attention in response to his prayers through serendipitous information encountering: "There is [sic] just too many times, when Scriptures, sermons, television programs, a piece of music…they fit what you are looking for to be a coincidence." He believed that these occurrences were specific answers to his prayers. The second sense was the more common role of prayer. In several contexts, information was gathered, and prayer was used as a tool to understand information. In eight passages prayer is paired with Bible study, suggesting an interrelationship. Prayer was often presented as a secondary process in information seeking; the respondents would gather relevant information and then use prayer as an interpretation tool, or alternatively as a means of confirming a course of action. The respondents associated perceived answers to prayer more frequently with "knowing" (8x) than with "feeling" (4x), suggesting they understood this as primarily a cognitive rather than affective process.

The theme of prayer and conflict was found in three interviews. Two respondents suggested that prayer was conflicting with technology as a means of information gathering. The inability to meet for corporate prayer caused a conflict for one respondent, as it limited information gathering and sharing. Two respondents raised the issue of unanswered prayer or conflicting answers to prayer. This created a significant unresolved tension, as most respondents described a strong belief in the importance of prayer, and that "God hears every prayer."

Discussion

Is prayer communication with God, and therefore a legitimate IS tool? Certainly the respondents in this study believe it to be. The role of non-human actors in sociological interaction has begun to be considered in the sociological literature. Cerulo (2009) argued that by allowing for non-human actors we "gain the potential to scrutinize important exchanges that traditional analytical frames block from view." (544) These interactions have, and continue to play a significant social role, be they with animals, deceased or deities. Interactants in prayer are selected with intent, and in accordance with beliefs, information need and personal faith histories (Cerulo, 2008).

Many of the qualities that make human sources preferable, can be seen in my respondents' selection of prayer as an information source: God is believed to be immanent, and aware of the need (convenience); prayer can meet affective needs for confirmation and affirmation; and prayer can provide information for a specific problem. Prayer was frequently used as a

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secondary information process, to evaluate information previously gathered. This parallels the preference for human opinions, and judgments. Prayer, when practiced corporately can also be seen to meet social needs, like human interactions in IS contexts.

Conclusion

Belief based information tools such as prayer pose challenges for ELIS researchers. I cannot listen in on an answer to prayer, nor empirically verify divine leading. That does not diminish that prayer is a real information source for my respondents. By heeding Cerulo's (2009) call to consider non-human social actors, we have the potential to open up unexplored aspects of religious IS, and to create a picture of respondents' IS experience in their spaces, and from their viewpoint.

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