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Information seeking and use in the context of minimalist lifestyles

Angela Pollak
Faculty of Information and Media Studies,
University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe information seeking and use (ISU) within the context of minimalist lifestyles and connect characteristics of living with less to theories of information poverty and resilience.

Design/methodology/approach – Naturalistic methods of inquiry describe minimalist lifestyles in a remote, rural context through semi-structured interviews with 24 adults. Environmental scanning and visual methods extended data collection retrospectively and longitudinally to span almost 118 years of community history. Qualitative thematic coding and analysis proceeded inductively and reflexively.

Findings – Living minimally in this environment results in adaptive strategies that compensate for lack of resources in general, and information resources specifically. Positive psycho-social attitudes such as optimism, creativity, curiosity, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency continue to be important factors in developing resilience in information seeking practices.

Research limitations/implications – Information poverty is usually defined relatively, and often in relation to formal, macro-level environments. Focussing attention on informal, local level ISU reveals alternate varieties of knowledge, ways of knowing and characteristics that create information resilience in the face of sometimes profound deficits.

Practical implications – Highlights of positive aspects to ISU in this remote, rural context will be of interest to researchers and practitioners serving rural library systems.

Originality/value – This study provides an historical and contemporary glimpse into the ISU patterns of a previously unexamined population and context, those who live minimalist lifestyles in a remote and rural location.

Keywords Canada, Environmental scanning, Visual methods, Information equity, Information poverty, Information resilience, Minimalism, Naturalistic methods

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Because the term poverty is usually associated with having insufficient access to economic, infrastructure, cultural, or social resources, the idea of being poor has come to symbolize inadequacy, deprivation, lack, or deficit in comparison to some variable, socially acceptable minimum standard (Haider and Bawden, 2007). In short, having less in western society generally means being poor, and vice versa. The ideological connection between less and poor in library and information science (LIS) research dates back to the mid-twentieth century, with researchers examining it in relation to access to information technology, resources, literacy, skills and education, and particularly among marginalized populations (Haider and Bawden, 2007).

Dating back at least as long, however, information behavior research has also recognized the highly contextual nature of information seeking (Allen and Wilson, 1999; Dervin, 1997; Kari and Savolainen, 2007; Savolainen, 2006a, b). Some have questioned the validity of a presupposed pathological connection between the concepts of less and poor (Hersberger, 2003). In fact, closer examination of discursive practices

that frame the conceptualization of information poverty, as well as detailed study of classically defined "information poor" people and contexts, suggests the relationship between the two, and more importantly, our conceptualization of information poverty itself, are not completely understood. One concept in particular that challenges the connection between less and poor is minimalism. Minimalism encompasses a range of lifestyles that place a high value on living with less.

Research questions
Presented as part of a larger study exploring experience as an information source across the domains of work, leisure and everyday life in a remote, rural community in Ontario, Canada, this study explores the interaction of a phenomenon, a context and a theory; specifically, the relationship between living with less in a remote rural location, and characteristics of information poverty and resilience. The following specific research questions guided analysis:

RQ1. What does minimalism look like in this context? (Who are the participants, what does it mean to live with less here, how has it changed over time?).

RQ2. Can we explain these characteristics within existing models of information seeking and use (ISU), in particular information poverty?

Phenomenon: what is minimalism?
While the idea of living frugally is as old as time, much of the vocabulary used to describe minimalist lifestyles is relatively new and rapidly evolving. The phenomenon has not yet been explored in LIS research, but the field of social psychology has shown interest in analyzing facets of minimalist subcultures and offers scholarly perspectives on some existing conceptualizations. Because the phenomenon is emerging, popular media in the form of documentaries, news articles and blogs offer the most robust descriptive information in terms of the breadth of vocabulary, lay-definitions and characteristics of various minimalist practices.

The term minimalism originates in the early to mid-twentieth century in the fields of art, literature, and architecture as a way of describing a design philosophy that encourages using "the minimum means necessary to achieve a desired result" (OED Online, 2016a). Although the term minimalism in relation to frugal lifestyles is not widely recognized in the academic record, it appears occasionally in the popular record, and seems to be the best available umbrella term to denote a variety of lifestyles that prize choosing low-cost, low-impact alternatives over expensive, luxurious, or materialistic options. Minimalism involves elements of self-sacrifice (e.g. doing without) and cleverness (e.g. finding new ways to repurpose salvaged items) and information seeking (e.g. do-it-yourself varieties of information). Some manifestations of minimalism are considered in vogue. Other forms remain on the periphery of social norms and mores. People tend to embrace minimalist lifestyles by two methods: one driven by many choices; the other driven by too few (Chin, 2006).

Minimalism by choice
The "many choice" method sees people, often those who live among the middle class or higher and who have the capacity to choose more expensive options, voluntarily trade consumeristic lifestyles for what they hope will be less complicated, more personally meaningful lives. Popular minimalist practices carry familiar, appealing and

marketable labels, including simple living (Cherrier, 2009), downward mobility (Buell, 2005), voluntary simplicity (Ambrose, 2010), the 100-item challenge (Mclaughlin, 2008), downshifting (Kennedy *et al.*, 2013), tiny-house/small house living (Susanka and Obolensky, 2009), do-it-yourself (Hemphill and Leskowitz, 2013), bohemianism (OED Online, 2016b), ethical consumption (Wooliscroft *et al.*, 2014), visiting the cottage, homesteading (Housel, 2006), back-to-the-landers (Gross, 2009), zero waste living (Star, 2015) and sharing economy (Government of Ontario, 2016). This type of branding has a certain attractive caché and status to it, leading to a steady supply of generally positive coverage in the popular media principally because it is a lifestyle choice that necessitates being well informed regarding economic, philosophic, social, and environmental agendas.

Minimalism by chance or by circumstance

The "few choice" method sees people who may lack the experience, desire, or means to live a more consumptive lifestyle existing outside mainstream materialistic society, sometimes through passive decision making. Although groups living on the periphery by chance of birth or by circumstance include populations from a range of socio-economic tiers, it also includes groups who are distinctly marginalized in some capacity (economically, socially, or geographically, for example) such as homeless or street people, students, rural residents or indigenous peoples. Normative reactions to this type of minimalist lifestyle range from perception of it as thrifty or frugal on one end of the spectrum, to "dirty" or undesirable at the other extreme, which leads to far less trendy labels, including poor, cheap, practical, second-hand economy (Robson, 2016), freegan (Ernst, 2010), opportunivores, urban gleaning (Edwards and Mercer, 2007), dumpster-diving (Carolsfeld and Erikson, 2013), binning (Young, 2015), waste-pickers (Furedy, 1993), and scavengers. Media coverage of this type of minimalism is growing but still limited, and often relegated to the broader problematization of poverty, or the sensational aspects of behaving incongruently with social expectations or in an anarchistic, anti-materialistic way. Yet, sustaining this minimalist lifestyle requires skill at an array of creative ways of recognizing value, "making do" and varying degrees of intangible information literacy.

Remote and rural minimalism

According to the 2011 census, approximately 18 percent of Canadians live rurally (Government of Canada, 2012). Of those six million people, over 400,000 are considered to live in remote rural locations, which means they are removed geographically such that they experience little to no influence from larger census metropolitan (urban) areas. Most of these communities are far removed from standard formal information systems like healthcare, education, public transit, emergency and social services. Very few of these communities enjoy library services that exceed a minimum 12 hours per week. Basic necessities cost more, and luxuries simply are not available for purchase locally. While some people choose to live remotely, others do so by chance or by circumstance. Regardless, living remotely necessarily means experiencing a minimal lifestyle.

Theoretical framework
ISU in context

ISU research concerns itself with why and how people choose to seek, share, and avoid information in a given context according to complex intrinsically and extrinsically motivated interactions. The channels in place to facilitate ISU can range from formal (interaction with structured, organizational systems, for example), to informal (casual

or impromptu person to person interactions, for example). Researchers have also taken a variety of approaches toward categorizing contextual dimensions of ISU. Although descriptive, accurate, and suitable for the studies in which they appear, on the whole the language could be described as value laden and highly specific, particularly if the goal is to find overarching connections and patterns between ideas. In seeking more neutral language, a contextual continuum ranging from micro (small scale) to macro (large scale) is illustrated below. Considering ISU across a matrix ranging from informal to formal systems in one direction, and micro to macro-level contexts in the other, the resulting grid includes the following four quadrants (Figure 1).

ISU research has produced a significant amount of knowledge about formal, macro-level information seeking (upper right quadrant). The formal information seeking behaviors and practices of professionals, scholars, and researchers – a large group of people, who work in large or esteemed professions, typically based in large, urban or metropolitan centers – has received much attention (Isah, 2008; Leckie *et al.*, 1996; Palmer and Neumann, 2002).

Because many contexts defy discrete categorization, there is considerable overlap between formal and informal, micro and macro. Consequently, specific occupations, environments, or activities may fit into more than one category depending on operationalization of the concepts. Overlapping concepts also make it easier to extend research between adjacent quadrants. For example, formal and informal information practices in macro contexts (right quadrants) share similarities (Crane, 1972), or conversely, formal information systems in macro and micro contexts (upper quadrants) share similarities (Harris and Dewdney, 1994).

Informal micro contexts have only recently begun to receive consideration. Groups represented in the informal micro-level category include populations who may be on the fringes of society (Mrozewski, 2010) or who comprise small or transitory special interest groups (Case, 2009). It may also include marginalized populations considered disadvantaged in some way (Markwei and Rasmussen, 2015), or contexts prioritized as comparatively less important or urgent (Chang, 2009). In all cases, research emphasis focusses on how these informal micro-groups seek, share or avoid information outside of formal systems.

This study seeks to increase our understanding of informal minimalist information behaviors and practices in a remote rural location, which constitutes a localized, micro-context. Although little is known theoretically about minimalist information practices, four ISU subspecialties offer insight into the present study's target population and context, including studies relating to everyday life information seeking (ELIS), information (in)equality, information resilience and workplace information seeking.
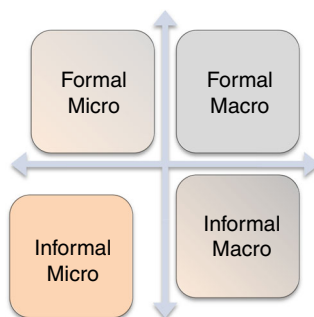
ELIS

The great paradox of researching the everyday is that familiarity, commonness, and the inescapable nature of activities of daily living not only shield us from an awareness of how critical these activities are to human survival, it also causes us to treat them as trivial (Savolainen, 2008). Everyday life is something we often do without thinking; it happens, in many places, at different times of the day and night, and in ways that are not generally documented or assessed in any fashion. ELIS research, therefore, is a subspecialty of ISU that validates common, ordinary experiences of ordinary people by exploring how we choose and use information sources during the course of regular and routinized activities of daily life. It includes pleasurable time spent in pursuit of leisure, and also maintenance activities associated with caring for self, family, or one's community (Savolainen, 2008). Because there is considerable overlap in all domains of life, it may also coexist with work-related activities, although work-related information seeking is generally viewed as a separately defined subspecialty.

Importantly, research tells us that ELIS is contextual, cultural, and personal. Savolainen (2009) explains that the way we balance our subjective and objective preferences (e.g. how much time we must dedicate to work and how much we choose to dedicate to leisure) define a natural order of things in our way of life. Mastering our way life requires us to actively and passively seek information and make choices according to cultural influences that may be beyond our control (e.g. demographics, social class, or mores) and individual influences (e.g. previous experiences or habits or access to resources) to maintain an acceptably normal and consistent lifestyle. Decisions to disrupt the normal order of things are generally approached in controlled ways, including decisions about whether, when and how to seek information.

Information (in)equality

Information inequality research describes the various constructions of ISU among populations considered in some way to be disadvantaged. Childers and Post (1975) published the first comprehensive report on the "knowledge needs of […] disadvantaged" adults in the USA in 1975, whom they defined as "lacking something that society considers important" or otherwise suffering from deprivation due to their "social, economic, cultural, educational, physical or ethnic condition". Since equality, or lack thereof, is both comparative and relative, what constitutes disadvantage in one setting might not be considered disadvantaged in another.

In the last 40 years, LIS researchers have taken multiple directions and approaches to develop theory and understanding of the information behaviors and practices of individuals and groups considered to be disadvantaged. At-risk populations examined include indigenous populations (Neelameghan and Chester, 2007), low income individuals (Chatman, 1985; Hersberger, 2003), farmers (Leckie, 1996), migrant workers (Fisher *et al.*, 2004), aging adults (Asla *et al.*, 2006; Chatman, 1991, 1992), incarcerated individuals (Fenster-Sparber *et al.*, 2012), and the disabled (Griebel, 2003; Lewis, 2013). The list is sufficiently broad to suggest that many groups have already been identified as disadvantaged, and sufficiently narrow to suggest that the potential number yet to be identified is limited only by the interest and availability of researchers, and the granularity with which they choose to define their study subjects.

While each of these groups is vulnerable in different ways, they also all share common economic disadvantages. Economic vulnerabilities are important to consider because so much information flow requires access to information and communication technology (ICT), yet there is no simple way to describe this complex relationship. In some cases,

economic poverty can co-occur with elements of information poverty – being unable to own or access or use ICTs can present an information barrier. However, Hersberger's (2003) study of homeless parents clearly showed that her study population's primary information needs were not digital. Similarly, Chatman's studies of aging women (Chatman, 1991), janitors (Chatman, 1987), and incarcerated individuals (Chatman, 1999) suggested that states of information poverty are characterized more by personal attitudes and community values than by finite resources.

Regardless, Haider and Bawden (2007) point out that appropriating the term "poor" in relation to states of information "well-being" invokes a number of problematic metaphorical and rhetorical constructs that reify a power dynamic thus reinforcing the proposed problem rather than solving it. For example, identifying a connection between not having access to technology and being information poor also creates a state of determinism whereby the very institution that labeled the problem becomes the only institution with the authority, responsibility and capacity to solve the problem. Similarly, Chelton (2001) points out that communication is a constitutive force; the act of describing or categorizing groups of people as "without" can only be done by those in positions of privilege, which biases understanding and interpretation of reality, and which unconsciously subverts the primary goal of achieving equity. Thus, describing one state of well-being as impoverished creates an opposite state of wealth, which sets up a system of analysis by dichotomy (e.g. "urban/rural, western/indigenous, developed/developing, literate/illiterate") (Haider and Bawden, 2007) that begs to be operationalized. Who decides which end of the spectrum is valued, which is pitied, and according to what criteria?

Information resilience

In the context of her work with homeless populations, Hersberger (2013) introduced the idea of information resilience to studies of information behavior because of the potential for it to inform practitioners' work with disadvantaged populations who showed a remarkable ability to persevere despite a great many serious obstacles. She notes that information resilience includes a number of strategies that not only buffer negative consequences, but also encourage success in spite of circumstances. More recently, Lloyd (2014, 2015) examined resilient information behaviors among refugees in Australia. Much work remains to be done in this area.

Workplace ISU

Work is generally considered to be the tasks we perform and the amount of time we trade for pay in order to earn a living. Although this study is not about workplace information seeking *per se*, occupations play an important role in describing access to resources among populations because they speak to education levels, skill levels, amount of leisure time, disposable income and so on.

Workplace ISU studies have focussed almost exclusively on occupations in the "formal, macro" category; those related to professional, research and scholarly contexts (Isah, 2008; Leckie *et al.*, 1996; Palmer and Neumann, 2002). Highlights of this research tell us that despite government and industry efforts to build strong formal sources and channels of communication, informal channels, personal knowledge, and experience continue to be vital components of ISU at work. Occupations associated with low skill levels and non-professional or blue collar contexts are often overlooked in ISU studies. The few that do exist suggest that these workplaces are complex information worlds

that require more study. Findings include preferences for informal human sources, especially when that information is derived from personal experience (Chatman, 1987), workers who are both producers and consumers of information (Veinot, 2007), and the existence of self-protective information behaviors including secrecy, deception, withholding of information, and gatekeeping (Pollak, 2009).

Research method and design

Characteristics like time, place, events, and culture influence our understanding of personal experiences of minimalism, resilience, and poverty. Therefore, data were gathered and analyzed through a series of naturalistic methodologies designed not only to explore events in situ (Cresswell, 2009), but also the ways in which individuals reflect on and reshape these events later (Lofland, 2005). This type of research is common to LIS and ISU research (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Cresswell, 2009; Savolainen, 2008). It is appropriate for exploratory studies because it affords the researcher, who often knows very little about the subject under investigation at the outset of the research, a great deal of flexibility to make discoveries through an iterative and reflexive process of data gathering and evaluation (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Data collection continued over an extended period of time in the field totaling 18 months and included semi-structured interviews with 24 adult residents between the ages of 20-24 and 80-89 years. An equal number of men and women were recruited for the interviews using multiple techniques: snowball sampling to identify like-minded individuals (Lofland, 2005), theoretical sampling to fill in gaps identified during analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), and maximum variation sampling to examine anomalous or outlier incidents (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Recruiting enough people to reach saturation required multiple methods of sampling in order to overcome situational and access challenges including personality traits (some people were outgoing and eager to participate while those who were more reserved declined) and access issues (people who perceived me as part of the community were more trusting, while those who did not were more reluctant). When convenience and systematic sampling methods had been exhausted, key informants proved highly effective at overcoming these obstacles by facilitating introductions based on their own personal relationships. In total, the sample size represented approximately 4.5 percent of the adult population of the village studied, and 2.5 percent of the larger township in which the village is situated.

Visual methods of data collection (Collier and Collier, 1986) proved both exciting and valuable. Although a photovoice approach focussed discussion on a specific series of landscape images of the community (Julien *et al.*, 2013; Wang and Burris, 1997), it became apparent that without personal meaning attached to the images, the ensuing conversations were all rather similar and average. In revising the technique, documentary photographs (Baker, 2004; Hartel and Thomson, 2011) and salvage photographs from participants' personal collections (Kuhn, 2007) were far more effective in the elicitation process (Haberl and Wortman, 2012). In total, 667 images were examined or created dating from the early 1900s to 2012.

Environmental scanning is the "acquisition and use of information about events, trends, and relationships" (Choo, 1999) in a specific context. Items discovered as part of the environmental scan included several dozen personal letters dating back to the 1940s, local school log books dating back to the 1930s, receipts, military records, newspaper articles, a dozen published non-fiction books, as well as self-published, personal biographies. The local public library also had a small collection of items produced by ministers serving at the local Catholic Parish, as well as from local school children and politicians.

Anonymity and confidentiality
Currently, the township is home to approximately 1,200 people, half of whom live in or near to the village examined in this study. Due to the size and intrinsic values of this community, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality was not possible, desirable or appropriate. Permission to ask each participant to waive anonymity was requested and approved through the University of Western Ontario's ethics review process. Participants were unanimous in their support for waiving anonymity. They were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and all requests for adjustment were honored. In some cases, particularly with reference to matters that were of questionable legality, triangulation of redacted references with sources found in the public record (e.g. in newspaper articles) was possible. While redacted material was not included in data analysis, the public record representation of the event was included. In some cases where it was appropriate to use a name to identify speakers in this report, only first names were used.

Data analysis
Interviews were transcribed, and all data gathered as part of the environmental scan was entered into Atlas.ti for further study. Data analysis consisted of qualitative thematic coding, followed by comparison, whereby "incidents that are found to be conceptually similar" are given "the same conceptual label" until each emerging theme is fully elaborated (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Using batch coding features in the software, overarching generic codes were applied to the transcripts very quickly to, for example, facilitate identifying content by the gender of the speaker and their age category. Open coding by hand continued down to a very detailed, descriptive indexing level (e.g. coding references to dates, names of businesses, people, and places). As the coding process evolved, the complexity of the coding taxonomy increased to group data points sharing similar ideas. For example, the word "Businesses" was added to the beginning of every code label identifying a business by name, which collocated data points alphabetically.

Axial coding established more complex programmatic relationships between alphabetic codes using what Atlas.ti calls "code families" and "super families." All items alphabetized under the same heading were tagged as a code family (Businesses became a code family, for example). Super families were then created and populated with code families that shared related attributes. For example, the Businesses code family (along with economy, education, military, tourism code families) were grouped into the "Work" super family because they all contained data points related to paid work in the community. Ultimately, the super families and code families became the broad themes. Organizing the data in this manner facilitated analysis by allowing for complex queries of not only individual data points, but also of different semantically connected groups of data points. All levels of codes were added, deleted, merged, separated and otherwise adjusted continually during this process until a stable set of codes was achieved. Adding code descriptions (notes about what to code in that category) facilitated this process.

For the purposes of this analysis, facets of minimalism were identified and then categorized as displaying "minimalist by chance" or "minimalist by choice" features. Categories were then examined for similarities and differences, and then further organized in relation to various technological, behavioral, and cultural determinants of information poverty.

Trustworthiness refers to the accuracy and credibility of findings in qualitative research (Cresswell, 2009). Design features of this study that increased trustworthiness include multiple data sources that allowed for triangulation, rich, thick description obtained via visual methods and elicitation, data collection that occurred over a prolonged period of time, and use of a variety of sampling techniques.

Minimalism by choice and by chance

Living with less in the early days

The site of this study has a long history intertwined with both forestry and tourism industries. Originally settled as a company town in 1895 to facilitate the logging industry, early residents of the village (including many immigrants) worked at the local mill and lived in a typically pioneer fashion (Lyons, 1986). At around the same time as the logging industry pushed forward with its agenda, the government established a national park reserve just to the west of the village to balance development needs with conservation. Internationally renowned, Algonquin Provincial Park now totals nearly 8,000 square kilometers and remains an influential factor in the community's survival (Algonquin Provincial Park, 2014). Up until 1936 when a paved road was added through the village (*Globe and Mail*, 1936), traveling into or out of the community for any purpose was a long and difficult task. People survived the isolation by finding work when they could get it (typically manual labor), engaging with the tourists during the summer season, and learning to be self-sufficient.

Living with less today

Though the infrastructure has improved, there are both quantitative and qualitative indications that this community is still disadvantaged economically in relation to the province of Ontario as a whole. The profile of this community (Fullerton, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2006, 2011) and the district in which it resides (Poverty Reduction Working Group of Nipissing, 2010) paints a picture of a population in decline, skewed toward fewer children and more retirees; where blue collar and service work make up three quarters of employment opportunities compared to a provincial average closer to 50 percent; where the unemployment rate is nearly double the provincial average; and where median incomes are both lower than average and disproportionately sourced from provincial transfer payments. Although not an inclusive list, these disadvantages are among the reasons the township receives additional federal and provincial resources to offset the costs associated with living in this location. Digitally, the community has access to cellular and internet service, however, it is expensive, and infrastructure remains a challenge. Services, including hydro, are still subject to periodic interruptions that can last from several hours to several days.

Living with less by choice

People who have lived with less by choice in this community share some unique characteristics. Historically, they were almost exclusively cottagers and business people who came to the area from across Canada and the USA. By and large, they were financially secure individuals with disproportionately high levels of post-secondary education and training, and who held well-paying, well-respected careers. Business people came for profit and employed locals in their businesses. Cottagers, on the other hand, came to the community to obtain a particular variety of pleasurable leisure lifestyle. They could afford to own a second dwelling away from a metropolitan center.

They contributed to the local economy by paying for services which included food, transport, and maintenance on their properties. Some early cottagers enjoyed the location so much they became permanent residents. Permanent residents who have come (or come back) to the community specifically to enjoy the isolation afforded by the location now make up a significant portion of the by choice group. Many left the community in their youth to pursue education or employment elsewhere, and are coming back now to retire (Table I).

The documentary record and interview data suggest that the ways and means of living with less by choice in this community can be categorized as follows:

- Privileged – Gertrude kept a summer home on Rock Lake in the 1890s. Here, she enjoyed a sizable dwelling that came complete with a stable, a blacksmith shop, a boat launch, a full time caretaker and a private railway station and car to ferry her between her lake house and her home in Ottawa. The family "always had a great entourage of guests, staff and relatives" (Clemson, 2005) to engage in a variety of activities with, including socializing, berrypicking and fishing. Gertrude may have had fewer comforts here than she enjoyed in her city home, however, she lived ostentatiously by local standards.

- Independent – As Algonquin Park's first female guide, in 1934 at the age of 19 Esther built a small dwelling in the park modeled on early ranger cabins. Although she grew up in Fredonia, New York enjoying a comfortable lifestyle during the depression, early wilderness experiences shaped her desire to "live in utmost simplicity of shelter, dress, food, entertainment, recreation, and human relations" (Keyser and Keyser, 2003) in the belief that "material wealth does not define happiness."

- Motivated – Gertie came to South Tea Lake in 1941 because she "needed to find a place to live that would be both good for [her husband's failing] health and less expensive. Conventional wisdom at the time was that living among the trees was good for the lungs" (Clemson, 2001). After her husband passed, Gertie continued to

| | Minimalist by choice | |
Historical		Contemporary
Status/role in community		
Cottagers, business people		Cottagers; permanent residents; people born in the community who choose to return, perhaps to retire
Primary residence		
USA, Quebec, Newfoundland, British Columbia, elsewhere in Ontario		Cottagers are typically from elsewhere in Ontario now; permanent residents live within community; decreasing US representation
Occupations		
Scholars, researchers, professionals including: professors, politicians, government ministers, executives, engineers, dentists, physicians, architects, diplomats, lawyers, judges, archeologists		Scholars, researchers, professionals, professors; healthcare professionals (nurses, pharmacists); public service employees
Other: ministers (pastoral), pilots, military officers, teachers, engravers, sailors		Trades: machine operators, road construction; skilled trades such as carpenters, millwrights Other: retired persons; business people and the self-employed

Table I.
Description of
minimalist by
choice population

live alone near the lake year round in a little built-by-hand cabin without electricity or plumbing for 35 years. She kept a root cellar, an ice house, and a variety of outbuildings from which she earned a modest living by providing tourist accommodations. By the age of 84, her healthcare needs exceeded the local capacity to care, and her family relocated her to a nursing facility in Southern Ontario.

- Familiar – many locals choose to leave the community, but the drive to return remains strong in some. Joe, for example, was born and raised in the community in the late 1800s, descended from Algonquin Indians and French settlers. After returning from Second World War military service, Joe came back to the community, and remained there for most of the rest of his life. "If it wasn't to give my wife a treat," he indicated, "I'd never go near another city again" (Wicksteed, 1993). In contemporary times, the story is much the same. Jane told of how, after high school, she trained in Ottawa to be a nurse and then worked at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto for about three years before returning to the community. "We thought that eventually we would want to have children, and we would prefer to bring our children up [here]."

Living with less by chance or by circumstance
People who live with less by chance or by circumstance in this community also share some unique characteristics. Historically, they were almost exclusively permanent residents, many of whom were recent immigrants of European descent. Often lacking formal education, they labored long hours in blue collar occupations like forestry, farming, hunting and trapping, guiding, blacksmithing, the military, and as cooks in the logging camps. Some entrepreneurial individuals opted to become self-employed. Today, many of the people who live locally are descendants of these original settlers, and while the specific occupations have changed (e.g. work opportunities now include healthcare, construction, and the arts) the need to seek out multiple sources of income and to become self-reliant through various domestic approaches like gardening, preserving food, sewing clothing, and bartering remains high (Table II).

Minimalist by chance or by circumstance	
Historical	Contemporary
Status/role in community	
Permanent residents, many recent immigrants	Permanent residents, sometimes dating back several generations; limited new immigration
Original primary residence	
European descent: Poland, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Scandinavia, Quebec, other parts of Ontario	Within the local township/community; elsewhere in Ontario
Occupations	
Farming, blacksmithing, logging, construction, service industry, tourism, trapping, guiding, arts and crafts, park rangers, carpentry, pilots, public service, military, handymen, land surveyors, professional artists, cooks, delivery/transport, barber, other	Farming, logging, construction, service industry, tourism, trapping, guiding, arts and crafts, carpentry, pilots, healthcare, public service, handymen, professional artists, cooks, other

Table II.
Description of minimalist by chance or by circumstance population

The documentary record and interview data suggest that the ways and means of living with less by chance or by circumstance in this community can be categorized as follows:

- Birth or circumstance – Gordon tells the story in his self-published memoir of his early life in the community. "I, Gordon, was born February 17, 1923 on a farm where I lived with two brothers […] and four sisters […] The farm was less than 4 km. from Hay Lake, in Sabine and Airy Townships. Dad was born in Wilno. [He] was a schoolteacher in Renfrew and came to the […] area in early 1900 to work as a clerk for Booth Lumber Co. […] Dad married [the foreman's] daughter and bought the farm from Mr. [R], who was supplying everything he grew to the lumber camps, plus beef and pork. Dad continued doing that […] Mother would take us and the girls picking berries once or twice a year. Dad would take us fishing to Hay Lake on a trail he had to the lake. Dad had 150 sheep, 15 head of cattle and a team of horses and lots of hens" (Palbiski, 2010).

- Satisfied – Sarah indicated that some people who reside in the community by circumstance have no interest in leaving because they are satisfied with the life they know. "There's ones that will never leave, and it doesn't matter how much opportunity you throw under their nose […] this is their home. They're quite fine working at the mill, or doing what they're doing […] I know one young man that lives up the road. All he does is walk in the bush, you know, save his money, that kind of thing. That's all he wants. That makes him happy. He's gonna build a house. Now, he's pleasantly happy. He's fine where he is."

Minimalism and ISU

From these descriptions, a picture begins to emerge of lifestyles that exist in contrast to each other and also to most of the variety represented currently in LIS literature. These groups live in the same environment and experience similar elements of disadvantage in different ways, each for their own reasons.

Minimalist information behaviors

Although formal information systems exist in the community, and they are considered essential minimum infrastructure, barriers prevent access. For example, local residents rarely call for assistance with nuisance bears because of geographic distance: help would take too long to arrive. In place of the formal system, they learn to be patient with nature, to make their properties less attractive to wildlife, and to manage aggressive situations independently. Similarly, formal information channels do not have the capacity to provide for a wide range of local information needs, for example, when or where fish are biting on a particular day. This information is best acquired by testing the waters personally or speaking with someone who recently has. Not surprisingly, people sometimes resist formal information systems because they are viewed as difficult to access, unhelpful, or as an unnecessary impediment to personal enjoyment. In the absence of useful formal sources and channels, people turn to informal sources – personal experiences and peer to peer conversations. Although there is a tendency for macro perspectives to look on this as satisficing, evidence suggests that these may actually be the most credible and reliable information source in this environment, at least some of the time.

Macro contexts tend to privilege formal information sources and channels, however, there is evidence of a number of highly effective informal ISU strategies at work. In anticipating needs, participants demonstrate characteristics of being positive and forward thinking in their approach to information seeking. Further, in learning from each other and learning to do things themselves, participants illustrate complex judgements in choosing key informants and assigning cognitive authority. A number of participants showed a great deal of tenacity in satisfying known information needs, but when formal and informal systems failed, they would also approximate, satisfice, or simply do without in whatever way would optimize outcomes. Examination of the informal information flow also highlighted a great deal of browsing, environmental scanning, information acquiring and sharing, and monitoring activities to stay abreast of current information – particularly local information – just in case it might be useful in the future.

There was no evidence that either the by chance or the by choice populations perceived themselves as deprived of information resources despite the fact that physical resources were often lacking for both. In fact, one participant declared, "I do follow and I do know where the resources are. We tap into the resources if we have to." In the case of minimalist by choice populations, this could be considered consistent with their class of occupations. Regarding the minimalist by chance group, this could be because their information needs are in fact being met (known and met), or because the information needs are unknown (unknown and unmet).

Minimalism and information poverty

Childers and Post (1975), Chatman (1996), and Hersberger (2003) have examined information poverty. The ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries (2000, 2016) also offers insight into information literacy competencies. The following elements have been described by these researchers and organizations as contributing to information deficits/poverty according to the dimensions specified. Study findings suggest a mixed result. For nearly every deficit present, anomalous examples illustrated compensatory or coping strategies that shielded residents from negative consequences.

Digital divide

Specific characteristics of the digital divide that contribute to information poverty include: geographic or economic barriers to ICTs, reliance on one-way (push) communication like television or radio; infrastructure instability, reduced quantity or quality of local formal information resources, and limited or no access to library services.

Although this geographic location is clearly at a digital disadvantage, complex informal networks of passing information evolved in earlier days to accommodate the limitations. For want of formal communication technology (telephones, telegraph service, mail service, etc.) messengers and private couriers filled in gaps. Telephone, cable, cell, and satellite service is now available in many locations throughout the township, but at a cost that is comparatively higher than populated centers. Free public internet is available at the very small local library, which is open 12 hours per week.

Coping strategies to accommodate the lack of digital resources ranged. In the early days, the minimalist by choice group were known to employ other analog methods of communication including lights, bells, and whistles between neighbors in close proximity when communication needs outweighed available technological sources. Today, when service is interrupted due to power fluctuations and outages residents simply do without until the services come back online. The library works to fill in gaps despite its small budget. Reduced access to resources is at times perceived as inconvenient, but not crippling.

Social divide
Physical or institutional barriers to accessibility, and reduced access to government and not-for-profit services can be indicators of information poverty.

Differing physical abilities are a significant impediment in this environment due to limited access to medical resources. There were no examples of disabled cottagers in the historical literature, however, falling ill with issues such as heart disease, whooping cough, tuberculosis, asthma, allergies, and stomach ailments was common and necessitated traveling to see the nearest doctor. Disabilities in contemporary times include age-related illnesses, childhood polio, substance abuse, terminal illnesses, mental health issues, accidental injury, and death, for which services are sought locally and in metropolitan areas. Importantly, deaths regularly interrupt the flow of information between generations, and disproportionately so in the minimalist by chance group. In many cases involving the death of a parent, family units were dissolved and dislocated in order to take care of orphaned children. In at least some cases, connections to the community were permanently altered, leaving the children without access to contextual information which suddenly became less important in their new, often urban, environments. In other cases, the widowed parent remarried or hired locally to help care for home and family.

To compensate for challenges associated with being socially displaced, the community is able to access government programming to assist with common needs, provided that individuals and/or the community meet the minimum program requirements. To accommodate the paperwork for accessing these formal governmental services, there is a Resource Center located in town where residents can go to find out about different programs and receive help filling out forms. Unfortunately, the community is often too small to meet requirements and so they do without programming. In the absence of Early Years programming, for example, an informal network of parents of similar-aged children sprung up to provide similar opportunities outside of the formal Early Years system. The nearest local not-for-profit services (food or clothing banks, for example) are a minimum of 40 km away, depending on the service, which makes access difficult.

Although there are helps in place, demand for formal, and informal social assistance exceeds availability. There are still many gaps and barriers.

Literacy/processing skills
Literacy and processing deficits that can lead to information poverty include: insufficient knowledge of how to use ICTs, lower rates of secondary and post-secondary education, insufficient personal communication skills, inability to find or evaluate information sources, and satisficing.

Not surprisingly, education levels varied dramatically between the minimalist by choice and minimalist by chance groups. For the former, the level of education achieved is self-explanatory by their titles and occupations and suggests a highly literate, well-educated population. This population is not historically represented in census data as they were neither residents nor citizens. On the other hand, census data shows that most people who live in the township now are disproportionately employed in blue collar occupations for which post-secondary training may not be essential. Consequently, levels of secondary and post-secondary education are persistently lower than provincial averages (Fullerton, 2009).

Nevertheless, a difference between schooling (book learning) and education (experience-based learning) appeared in the data. Lack of formal education did not present any obvious barriers to living successfully in the community, and many

incidents emerged where experience-based learning was actually more useful and therefore preferred, particularly in relation to nature and the natural world. Further, four of the 24 interviewees had undertaken extraordinary literacy projects by writing personal biographies or pursing genealogical projects, including one by an octogenarian who only formally finished fourth grade.

Awareness of information sources

Information poverty has been associated with lack of awareness of information sources including: compromised ability to identify information needs, cognitive barriers (education, disability, etc.), limited social world or narrow world view, past and present thinking, strong ties within the community with comparably fewer ties outside the community, and perceived reduction in quantity or quality of information resources.

Historically, the minimalist by choice group had a wide variety of information sources and well developed networks offering access to both formal and informal sources within and outside of the community. The documentary record made regular references to formal, authoritative information sources that included park rangers, the park superintendent, lease-holders association, politicians, Department of Lands and Forests, and the Ontario Provincial Police. Informal sources included personal experience, each other, First Nations people, and locals.

Alternately, the minimalist by chance group had access to a less extensive network of formal information providers across time periods, and more access to informal networks. Informal sources were commonly consulted and included personal experience, each other, relatives (parent, child, siblings), elders in the community, First Nations people, local "experts," folk lore, acquaintances who lived away, and the environment and natural world. Personal experience, as well as the local physician, were integral information sources across time periods. In contemporary times, medical referrals, government agencies, publications, the internet, social gatherings and news sources factor in more often.

Overall, participants felt they had adequate access to information sources and services. One participant commented specifically on how the internet has affected their access to information: "I'm connected to the world with that computer there […] I'm as good as I am sitting in the city […] We have everything we want here."

Affective component

Affective experiences such as lack of confidence, uncertainty, mistrust, aversion to risk, heightened awareness of negative consequences, expectation of failure, and hostility toward outside sources have been associated with information poverty.

Historically, negative emotions associated with the minimalist by choice group included anger and upset at vandalism to property, indifference of logging industry to cottagers interests, personal feelings of guilt for knowledge of poaching activities, or shock and sadness at policy changes leading to the end of cottager lease renewals. In more current times and among both minimalist by choice and by chance groups, examples of negative affect were primarily centered on experiences around accident, illness, death, and substance abuse. Minimalist by chance groups were more likely to express skepticism toward outsiders, or expectation that formal information systems were not helpful.

On the other hand, examples of positive affect not previously discussed in information poverty literature were uncovered. The documentary record routinely reflects positive attributions by early cottagers toward the atmosphere of the community, with comments such as "[…] once the place gets into your blood it fills your soul with a sense of wonder,

peace and tranquility, that is never found anywhere else" (Clemson, 2001). Other adjectives describing the experience include: breathtaking, intense, wondrous, beautiful, fine, great fun, wonderful, marvelous, and beloved. Positive affect was also expressed by current residents in both groups toward the willingness to help, simple, joyful experiences (long term relationships, self-sufficiency, friendship, family, outdoor activities like sports, campfires, tobogganing) and the astonishing beauty of the landscape.

Despite experiences of extreme poverty, natural dangers, and difficult working conditions, interviewees regularly expressed joy at their memories of growing up in the community. In summarizing her experiences of growing up disadvantaged economically, one female interviewee noted "we didn't know we were worse off, because we didn't know any different." Several people indicated that they would not trade their life in the community for anything.

Protective (negative) information behaviors
Protective negative information behaviors associated with information poverty include information overload, information avoidance and blunting, and self-protective behaviors such as secrecy and deception.

The record showed historical examples of self-protective secrecy and deception concerning activities in contravention of formal laws or policies. For example, attempts were made to keep information about poaching activities private. Examples of deception included accounts of people who concealed their identities while vandalizing property. There were also a number of examples among the cottagers of exploiting valuable information channels (personal connections with high ranking officials) for community benefit. One example of risk taking saw a cottager inform the Department of Lands and Forest of poaching activities carried out by family members.

Interestingly, however, there were also a great many examples of modest or benign secrecy and deception. Socially stigmatized conditions and activities are kept secret or anonymous (e.g. extreme poverty, substance abuse, mental health issues) to prevent embarrassment of others. People also help each other in secret when there is a known need (i.e. providing resources like food, clothing, fuel, etc.) Other accounts of secrecy included caching objects (canoes, cooking instruments) in the forest to make navigation easier. Accounts of deception revolved around humor (practical jokes), and purposefully confusing outsiders (such as sport fishermen) directionally in the bush to safeguard location information and local guiding livelihoods.

Minimalism and information resilience
Despite obvious disadvantages associated with remote and rural locations, people continue to live a minimalist lifestyle here. Those who do it by choice forgo urban luxuries in favor of other intangible benefits. Those who do it by chance or by circumstance are not motivated by external material luxuries to change their way of life. In the face of some serious, consequential challenges, what makes the trade worthwhile? What balances out the "order of things" in this context?

In fact, a good many people are not able to reconcile a satisfactory order of things with this variety of minimalist lifestyle. These people are not represented in this study because they have chosen to leave the community and simply do not return. "It's kind of the end of the line in many ways," said one participant. "When people come there, you kind of just hold your breath waiting for them to leave. You don't think they're going to make it. And lots of times they don't."

But for the minimalists who do make it, there is value to be found in the deficit. Less means fewer people, fewer rules, less stress, and less demand for their participation in consumptive practices. One participant described this in terms of a double edged sword. "We'd like full time work, but we sort of don't want people to find us either so there's masses [of people] here, you know?" The sacrifice improves quality of life through simplicity, privacy, tranquility, and insulation from busyness. There is a measure of satisfaction in mastering the behavioral and social competencies required to navigate everyday life here, including ISU. These competencies lead to resilience through flexibility, creativity, cooperation, civic participation, and positive attitudes.

Conclusion

Examining minimalist lifestyles through the lens of ISU, particularly information poverty and resilience, is an exercise in contradictions: although both groups experienced economic and technological challenges, people who make the choice to live minimally here continue to be a highly literate, financially stable, socially connected group of people. Individual incidents of hostility, suspicion, or instability did not inhibit otherwise generally friendly, supportive, stable, open and positive community connections. While evidence of secrecy surfaced, secret behaviors were not always self-protective mechanisms, but rather examples of anonymous benevolence. Isolation and fewer financial resources make accessing basic technology and continuing education difficult, particularly for the minimalist by chance group. However, those who are unschooled are not necessarily illiterate, or uneducated. Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult to describe either the minimalist by choice or the minimalist by chance group as information poor.

Findings of this study reveal that current profiles describing information poverty do not account for the many successful information behaviors exhibited in this context, where psycho-social attitudes such as optimism, creativity, curiosity, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency continue to be important factors in information resilience. Nor do the systems that privilege western ideals and urban contexts yet recognize or value the intangible, experiential, and location-specific types of information frequently preferred with very good reason in this informal, local context.

Implications of these findings for information studies are twofold. First, researchers with access to and an interest in minimalist contexts more broadly (including alternate minimalist lifestyles and remote, rural and indigenous settings specifically) should be encouraged to pursue basic ISU research in these locations. Although access to these populations is difficult at times, and the pool of people who might undertake such research is small, doing so will expand our understanding of a variety of ELIS practices about which we currently know very little theoretically. Further, expanding ISU research into other contexts situated within the informal micro quadrant is likely to result in refined and expanded ISU theory across a wider spectrum of everyday life experiences.

Second, just as research tends to privilege formal macro settings, so also does the allocation of resources for public library service in Canada tend to privilege larger, metropolitan library systems and formal, documentary resources (Demers *et al.*, 2014). Although the reasons for this are many, and justifiable, the situation nevertheless leaves a multi-tiered library system where the people who most need access to these resources, and the people who most need representation in the system, are least likely to receive adequate levels of service and representation. Applied research projects targeting ways to capture and retain alternate varieties of knowledge, alternate ways of knowing and characteristics that create information resilience in the face of sometimes

profound deficits have the potential to introduce a new degree of equity to public library service, particularly in remote, rural, and indigenous communities. Researchers, LIS practitioners, and policy makers at all levels are encouraged to consider partnerships with the greatest potential to improve or transform public library services to these populations.

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About the author
Angela Pollak completed her PhD in Library and Information Science at the University of Western Ontario where she examined experience as an information source in rural, blue collar and leisure contexts. Her interdisciplinary, often innovative theoretical and methodological approach to information behavior research has earned her several awards including the ALISE/ Proquest Methodology award (2014) and the Eugene Garfield Dissertation award (2016). Angela is an Active Member of the Association for Library and Information Science Education, the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, and the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies, and served as Co-chair for the Annual Canadian Association for Information Science Conference (Calgary, AB, June 2016). She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Alberta's School of Library and Information Studies in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Angela Pollak can be contacted at: apollak@uwo.ca