Practice
Information Practices of Immigrants

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Introduction

International migrants are defined as people living outside their country of birth (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). International migration is one of the most vital global issues of our century; according to the International Organization for Migration (n.d.), more people are moving across international borders than ever before and close to 200 million people currently live outside their country of birth. This figure represents approximately three percent of the world’s population, meaning that one in every thirty-five persons in the world is a migrant. The number of international migrants increased by 45 million between 1965 and 1990; it is currently growing at an annual rate of 2.9 percent (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). There are many reasons people migrate from one country to another. If well managed, migration can be beneficial for both individuals and societies. Yet, migration remains a complex issue that affects the economic and social fabric of many countries.

This chapter examines the roles that information resources, institutions, and technologies play in the everyday lives of international migrants. With millions of people migrating to another country and needing to settle and “integrate” in the host society, there are significant opportunities and challenges for the information professions in terms of understanding how immigrants seek information, what their needs are, what practices they have adopted and adapted, and the potential barriers they encounter along the way.

Because of the complexity of the immigration experience, we specifically address immigrant information needs and uses in the context of everyday life—with an eye toward information and information practices that help migrants in their settlement and inclusion into the new country. Research within library and information science (LIS) points to the importance that identifying information needs and barriers has on individual lives. When information about settlement services, housing, employment opportunities, health, or education is not easily available to newcomers, navigation through the information environment is daunting. Because immigrants often lack the basic information, as well as social, civic, and economic
capital to function fully in their new country, theirs is more often a matter of survival than full participation and inclusion (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003).

In this chapter we focus primarily on the experiences of immigrants in the United States and Canada, largely because this is primarily what appears in LIS literature. The scope of this research is large; our synthesis is therefore limited to studies that examine how the lived experiences of immigrants have an impact on their information behaviors (needs, sources, uses, and barriers). A scan of the LIS literature containing the terms immigrant, immigration, multicultural, or multilingual reveals thousands of articles. Most of this literature is beyond the scope of this review. For example, we do not address research in the following areas: multiculturalism in LIS schools or among library staff (Abdullahi, 2007; Alexander, 2008; Allard, Mehra, & Qayyym, 2007; Greiner, 2008; Hall-Ellis, 2007); specific service provision to immigrants at public libraries (Berry, 2007; Bober, 2008; Hammond-Todd, 2008; Winkel, 2007); multilingual service provision to international students in academic libraries (Zhuo, Emanuel, & Jiao, 2007); representations of multiculturalism in various media such as children’s books (Bowen, 2007; Bradford & Huang, 2007); the merits or demerits of diversity, multiculturalism, or multilingual services in libraries (Cooper, 2008; Neely & Peterson, 2007); and technical systems issues such as multilingual searching or retrieval, interface design, or subject headings (Alpert, 2006; Beall, 2006; Bjorner, 2008; Booth, 2006; Daumke, Marku, Poprat, Schulz & Klar, 2007; Notess, 2008; Ravid, Bar-Ilan, Baruchson-Aribib, & Rafaeli, 2007). Exceptions are made to the extent that articles within any of these bodies of literature specifically address how immigrants, themselves, seek or use information in the contexts of their daily lives.

The studies in this review are, for the most part, academic or research-based. This stands in contrast to the fact that most of the literature within LIS on the topic of immigration is practitioner-based and focuses on the practicalities and debates that surround the provision of public library services to immigrants. The practitioner-based literature is often descriptive and does not always reveal a great deal about the day-to-day information practices of immigrants. However, the perspective of individuals serving and working with immigrants is invaluable. Wherever possible, we make use of this literature to complement the more research-oriented literature in the field that addresses how information fits within the lived experiences of immigrants.

The scope of this review is multidisciplinary and extends beyond the LIS domain. Within the immigration literature more generally, a great deal has been written that is relevant to this topic. Information practices are often not identified as such and are subsumed under other immigrant activities such as settlement or media consumption. Where relevant, we also examine research from communication and media studies, immigrant and refugee studies, cultural studies, and sociology.

The chapter is divided into three sections: the first defines key terms (i.e., what is an immigrant?) and issues vital to the study and understanding of immigration. In the second, we examine what is known about the information practices of immigrants, surveying the LIS literature as well as exploring literature in related fields that shed light on immigrants and their lived experiences. Finally, we propose a research agenda for future work in this area and outline gaps in the literature.
The Immigrant Experience

International migration involves the movement of millions of people annually. This process, whether prompted by economic, political, or environmental concerns, has vast implications for both sending and receiving nations. Although this chapter focuses on the experiences, needs, and uses of information by immigrants, it is important to define a few key terms and issues essential to an understanding of immigration: (1) immigration policies, (2) the context of immigrant reception in the host society, (3) the heterogeneity of immigrants, and (4) the challenges of defining and studying the processes of immigrant settlement and integration.

Who Is an Immigrant?

Immigrants are people who migrate “from one country to another on a permanent basis” (Li, 2003, p. 1). As such, immigrants are a subset of the hundreds of millions of individuals currently living outside their country of birth or citizenship. International migrants include anyone living outside their country of citizenship but the condition of permanence in the term immigrant excludes those living abroad temporarily, such as visitors, migrant workers, and international students. It should be noted that we have included several studies of temporary migrant groups, including migrant workers and international students, in this review. In addition to comprising a large portion of the literature, these groups have many commonalities with other immigrants and therefore their inclusion contributes to our overall understanding of the everyday life contexts of immigrants.

Refugees are a part of the immigrant population but differ in many ways from other immigrants as their migration is involuntary. Refugees are defined as international migrants who have been found to have a justified fear of persecution that makes them unwilling or unable to return to their country of origin (Castles & Miller, 1998). Unlike most immigrants, refugees may have experienced trauma, imprisonment, persecution, or lengthy residence in a refugee camp prior to resettlement. These experiences may provide additional challenges in their lives following migration and may result in unique information needs and uses. The criteria, procedures, and policies determining immigrant or refugee status vary among nations.

Immigration Policies

Immigration policy is the “crucial element determining immigration patterns” (Meyers, 2004, p. 3). Although immigration policy has a significant impact on the settlement and integration of immigrants, no LIS research to date has examined how immigration policy affects the everyday life information seeking or information practices of immigrants.

In order to cope with vast numbers of potential immigrants, nations such as the United States and Canada have instituted policies designed to control the number as well as the qualifications and characteristics of immigrants permitted to settle permanently. A wide range of factors influences the formation of immigration policy by nations; these are too numerous to be discussed here in great detail. Examples include: economic concerns, birth rates, international political allegiances, humanitarian issues, and colonial histories. Falling birth rates and labor
market shortages may prompt a country to increase the number of immigrants admitted annually; political and historical ties to other nations, as well as commitments to humanitarian initiatives in different regions, are factors that may determine the source countries from which immigrants are admitted. For a more complete discussion of the determinants of migration policy, see Meyers (2004) or Cornelius and Tsuda (2004).

Canadian immigration policy distinguishes three categories of immigrants eligible for admission: the family class, the economic class, and the refugee class. The family class includes close family members of Canadian citizens or permanent residents, such as spouses, children, parents, and common-law partners; the economic class includes skilled workers or investors selected on the basis of educational criteria or financial capacity to invest (Li, 2003). The refugee class includes individuals and families admitted on humanitarian grounds. Immigrants in the economic class are selected using a system that awards points based on criteria such as education, language ability, work experience, and age; this system is not applied to family class immigrants or to refugees (Li, 2003). Almost 55 percent of immigrants who entered Canada in 2007 belonged to the economic class; 28 percent were family class, and 12 percent were refugees (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008) (see Table 11.1). These figures demonstrate the priority given to economic factors in determining Canada’s immigration policy.

U.S. immigration policy shares common characteristics with the Canadian system. Family sponsorships comprise the vast majority (66 percent) of immigrants to the U.S. annually; economic immigrants, refugees, and diversity immigrants make up 15 percent, 13 percent, and 6 percent of the total, respectively (Jefferys & Monger, 2008) (see Table 11.1). As in Canada, methods of selection applied to economic migrants in the U.S. do not apply to family members or refugees (Meyers, 2004). Not all immigrants to the United States enter the country as immigrants, however; more than half arrive on non-permanent visas, such as the H-1B visa for skilled temporary foreign workers, and adjust their status at a later date while residing in the U.S. (Martin, 2004).

It should be noted that a tightening of restrictions has taken place since the 1980s, leading to a reduction in the number of refugees admitted to countries such as the U.S. and Canada, as well as many European nations (U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2002). Only a small proportion of asylum seekers, people whose application for refugee status has yet to be approved, are eventually accepted as refugees (U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2002).

Although immigration policy determines who can be considered an immigrant, individual nations cannot always fully control who migrates. This becomes evident when one examines the nature and scale of illegal or irregular migration. Undocumented migrants, also referred to as non-status, are those who either enter a country without permission to stay or enter legally but overstay their permits. The Department of Homeland Security estimates that, in 2007, 11.8 million undocumented migrants were living in the U.S., with an annual average increase of almost 500,000 people (Hoefler, Rytina, & Baker, 2008). Although the Canadian government does not publish estimates of the number of undocumented migrants currently living in Canada, an advocacy group places the figure at between 200,000 and 500,000 (No One is Illegal Vancouver, n.d.). Due to the paucity of
research on undocumented migrants, their information uses and needs are not discussed in this chapter.

**Context of Reception**

Although immigration is a global phenomenon, it is also one that is greatly influenced by local contexts. Various country-specific structural factors influence the lives of immigrants and refugees before and upon arrival, including immigration policies (as has been noted), economic and labor market issues, public perception of and attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, and the degree of assistance provided by the government or other agencies to support resettlement.

Both the micro and macro aspects of the immigration experience can greatly affect the context of reception for immigrants and refugees and have important implications for the process of adjustment, settlement, and integration. These aspects, in turn, may significantly influence the informational needs and information-seeking behaviors of immigrants and refugees, as well as the nature of social networks and other resources at their disposal.

The institutional realities of the host country can shape the experiences of immigrants in a variety of ways, for instance, by offering support in settlement and citizenship acquisition (Bloemraad, 2006) or by permitting or restricting the sponsorship of family members by immigrants. Nations encourage immigrants to become citizens through various policies. In its most basic sense, citizenship is the possession of full membership in a community and articulates the relationship between the individual and the state (Joppke, 2007). In Canada, immigrants are understood by government as potential citizens and are encouraged to participate in civic life and become involved in their new communities through a number of programs and initiatives (Bloemraad, 2006). Resources such as information services,
settlement services, support through ethnocultural community agencies, and language courses are made available to newcomers in Canada at no cost; these are funded by the federal government. In the U.S., the federal government does not provide immigrants with resources to acquire citizenship, a process that is left up to the individual newcomer (Bloemraad, 2006). Many nations are now actively encouraging not only immigrant citizenship but also permitting dual citizenship.

In some cases, financial assistance, housing, orientation programs, and other forms of support are provided by the government specifically for refugees following their arrival in the host country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2008).

**Heterogeneity of Immigrants**

Relatively little is known about how immigrant communities locate and access information in forms that are understandable and usable to them. Little is known also about their attitudes toward awareness of and skills in utilizing various information institutions and related technologies. This situation is due in large extent to the heterogeneous nature of immigrants as a user group.

Immigrants and refugees are extremely diverse groups whose needs, experiences, and strengths vary significantly depending on various factors, including: education, age, sex, country of origin, family status, and their knowledge of English or the dominant language in their new country. Immigrants also arrive under a variety of immigration classes, have diverse backgrounds, and may or may not be familiar with the receiving country’s institutions and values. For example, skilled workers or business class immigrants may have differing information needs and practices than sponsored family members or refugees.

**Challenges in the Field of Immigration Research**

Some challenges to the study of immigration and the information practices of immigrants relate to the difficulty in defining key concepts such as “integration,” “inclusion/exclusion,” or settlement”; others relate to methodological issues having to do with conducting research on such a diverse and heterogeneous study population.

**Defining Concepts**

Integration is a concept that is extremely difficult to define; its meaning depends greatly on the context of immigrant reception in each society and can change over time. Anthropologists define a related concept, acculturation, as the adoption of the norms, values, and behaviors of one group by another (Berry, 1997). Psychologists explore acculturation at the individual level by examining factors that influence the series of decisions made by individual immigrants in giving up or retaining different aspects of their culture of origin (Berry, 1997). In sociology, integration has been considered a one-way process of assimilation, in which the immigrant gives up his or her culture in favor of adopting that of the host society (Park & Burgess, 1921) or a two-way exchange through which both the immigrant and the institutions
of the host society adapt as a result of their exposure to one another (Gordon, 1964). Alternate models of immigrant adaptation in psychology have called into question the linear nature of assimilation. The concept of biculturalism, for instance, proposes that immigrants may assume cultural characteristics of the host society while maintaining their culture of origin (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Immigration researchers have not reached consensus and debates over the nature of immigrant adjustment are ongoing. It is evident, therefore, that a variety of challenges exist for LIS researchers attempting to both define this process and understand how it affects the everyday lives of immigrants and their information practices. For a more complete discussion of models of immigrant assimilation and integration and their evolution over time, see Gordon (1964) or Alba and Nee (2003).

Social inclusion is another concept that frames the experiences of immigrants and their reception in the host society. Primarily found in policy documents and research in Europe and more recently in Canada, the concept of social inclusion originated in Europe in the 1970s. Social inclusion is a multi-dimensional concept with economic, cultural, social, and political dimensions. It emphasizes the multiple interconnected ways exclusion occurs (i.e., on many levels and as a result of multiple inequalities and social, economic, and civic barriers). As used today in Canada, social inclusion is a tool for promoting social justice and inclusion for marginalized members of Canadian society (Frazee, 2003; Luxton, 2002; Mitchell & Shillington, 2002; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). It argues that individuals have a voice into what they are and supports the rights of individuals to make meaningful decisions about themselves and their communities.

For immigrants and refugees, social inclusion refers to the realization of their “full and equal participation in the economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions of life” (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003, p. 1). Research examines how immigrants are at risk of exclusion (e.g., Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Saloojee, 2005). Because immigrants often lack the basic information, as well as social, civic, and economic capital to function fully in their new country, Omidvar and Richmond (2003) argue that theirs is more often a matter of survival than full participation and inclusion. Caidi and Allard (2005) maintain that access to necessary information is also a fundamental component for achieving social inclusion for immigrants. Without adequate information access, immigrants will be unable to make informed choices and decisions. When immigrants do not have readily available information about settlement services, housing, employment opportunities, citizenship, health, or education, navigation through an unfamiliar information environment and inclusion into a new country becomes a difficult and frustrating process.

In addition to the concepts of integration and social inclusion, transnationalism is another useful framework that shapes the information practices and needs of immigrants. Transnationalism, a concept that emerged out of anthropology in the early 1990s, is defined as “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders” (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994, p. 6). It posits that immigrants do not enter a host nation and sever all links with their country of origin, being absorbed seamlessly into their new culture (as suggested by some theories of assimilation
described previously). Instead, many immigrants retain ties with their home countries through “social, cultural, economic, and political linkages” (Faist, 2000, p. 210).

Indeed, many new immigrants maintain ongoing and sustained contact with their home nations in a variety of ways, including remaining politically active in their country of origin (Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003; Sampredo, 1998), sending remittances back to family members, and remaining in close and frequent contact with family and friends. Transnational processes have been enabled in our present historical context through the abundance of new technologies, such as the Internet, inexpensive telephone calls and airfares, and international financial institutions (Kelly, 2003). Of relevance to LIS, information seeking and exchange is a common transnational activity (Faist, 2000) occurring among immigrant social networks and via various technologies and media.

The term *immigrant settlement* represents another concept central to the study of immigration and the informational needs of newcomers. Settlement is the process by which immigrants adjust to their new homeland; it involves the search for housing, employment, schools for their children, healthcare, and the acquisition or improvement of English language skills. Although this term is used to refer to the short-term and practical experiences of immigrants (as opposed to integration, which refers to cultural and behavioral adaptation that could take a lifetime or multiple generations to achieve), there are aspects of the concept of settlement that have not yet been clearly defined.

It has been argued that adapting to life in a new country is best understood as a process, or a continuum, with various stages associated with specific needs and attitudes toward resources, institutions, and technologies. Mwarigha (2002) notes three overlapping stages in the settlement process of newcomers. In the first, needs include pressing matters such as food, shelter, orientation to a new city, language interpretation, and language instruction. In the intermediate stage, newcomers’ needs include access to various local systems and institutions, such as municipal services, legal services, long-term housing, health services, and employment-specific language instruction. Lastly, immigrants “strive to become equal participants in the country’s economic, cultural, social and political life” (Mwarigha, 2002, p. 9). At this stage immigrant needs are more diverse and individual in nature. Learning how to overcome systemic barriers to equal participation can be viewed as a common process for many immigrants at this stage. As they become accustomed to their adopted country, find their place in society, and actively contribute economically and socially to their communities, immigrants may experience, for example, the need to belong more fully and to become an active citizen through political participation, civic engagement, and cultural celebrations (Papillon, 2002).

Attempts to create a model of settlement, however, raise questions as to the linear nature of settlement and the concept’s temporal limits. For instance, the search for employment could be considered a short- or long-term settlement need, as immigrants may find initial employment upon arrival but may spend years searching for, or even be ultimately unsuccessful in finding, employment suitable to their qualifications.

The ambiguity of immigrant settlement and integration as temporal processes can be seen in the lack of consistent or well-defined terminology with which to refer to and distinguish among groups of recently arrived or longer-settled immigrants.
The terms “newcomer” or “recent immigrant” are used without definition in policy documents; academics appear to take a longer view and often differentiate among groups based on generational status.

In academic studies of immigrant integration, authors refer to those who were born abroad as the first generation and their children born in the new homeland as the second generation. Studies of this nature attempt to identify differences between generational groups in terms of their educational status, income, employment levels, language ability, and other characteristics. This is done in order to trace the effects of immigration on different groups over time. For more detailed analyses of the experiences of the second generation and the 1.5 generation (a term which refers to youth who immigrated as children) see Zhou (1997), Boyd and Grieco (1998), Boyd (2002), Alba (2005), and Waldinger and Feliciano (2004).

Another challenge in immigration research is the practical difficulty of involving immigrants themselves. This issue is likely the cause of significant gaps in the literature on immigrant populations and recently arrived immigrants in particular. Difficulties in contacting and recruiting recently arrived immigrants, as well as the costs of translation and interpretation services, pose barriers to researchers hoping to study the process of immigrant settlement and the information practices of immigrants (for examples, see Deri, 2005; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008).

It should be clear from this discussion of immigration policy and the challenges of immigration research that the issues facing both LIS researchers and service providers attempting to meet the informational needs of immigrants are complex. Immigrants, as both study populations and user groups, are extremely diverse and, as a result, their information practices and needs vary substantially.

Information Practices of Immigrants

We now turn our attention to what the literature says about immigrants’ everyday lives and the role played by information. We examine in particular the concept of information practices, which encompasses information seeking, information use, and information sharing (Savolainen, 2008).

Some Key Concepts

For immigrants (particularly newcomers) who may not yet have established patterns or information practices, finding information to navigate everyday life can be a dauntingly complex process. Mehra and Papajohn (2007, p. 12) refer to this as a “culturally alien information environment.” Both information needs and barriers to accessing adequate information are significant. During the immigration process individuals need to make sense of the values and patterns in their lives, which are generally in flux. New patterns and networks must be established; all of this has an impact on information practices and the ability to find relevant information. Srinivasan and Pyati (2007) coined the term “diasporic information environment” as a way to capture the complexity of immigrant lives that operate on both local and transnational planes.

The notion of everyday life information seeking (or ELIS) is useful in shedding light on the complexity of immigrants’ quotidian information practices. ELIS
holds that individuals seek information on a daily basis in complex ways and from a variety of sources in order to manage their lives (Savolainen, 1995, 2007, 2008). In other words, the everyday life context out of which an information need arises contributes significantly to how that need is made sense of and addressed. Personal attributes and societal structures and values shape the way individuals organize, prioritize, and live their lives. Thus ELIS is often habitual, non-rational, and has multiple goals.

A related concept, “information practices” (also referred to as “everyday information practices” as such activities are usually embedded in everyday contexts), is also particularly suited to the study of immigrants. Savolainen (2008, p. 2) defines it as “a set of socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources such as television, newspapers, and the Internet.” Savolainen (and others) emphasize in particular the “habitual” nature of these practices, and their occurrence in work as well as non-work-related contexts. Moreover, as McKenzie (2003) notes, information practices captures active information seeking as well as less-directed activities. Active information practices include the recognition of an information need (or gap in one’s knowledge about a subject) as well as information seeking (or the attempt to resolve that gap). Less-directed practices include browsing the Internet or gaining unanticipated but useful information from chatting with someone. Information practices capture subtle activities such as recognizing an information need but choosing to ignore it or not recognizing the need for information at all. Information practices also account for the myriad creative ways that individuals attempt to work around barriers that limit their information seeking. Information practices are not strictly strategic but are linked to our understandings of the world and everyday habits. The concepts of “information fields” (Johnson, Case, Andrews, Allard, & Johnson, 2006, p. 570), “information horizons” (Sonnenwald, 1999, p. 176) and “information source horizons” (Savolainen & Kari, 2004, p. 415) all suggest ways in which individuals make sense of, and navigate, their information worlds, along with their preferred information sources.

Information practices are structured along three modes: information seeking, information use, and information sharing (Savolainen, 2008, p. 4). The inclusion of information sharing is particularly useful for our understanding of the relationships among information and communication activities. Indeed, the social and communicative dimensions of information sharing among individuals are manifest through the establishment, maintenance, and extension of social networks; through transnational ties; as part of activities taking place in information grounds; and so on.

Using concepts that imply fluidity between the deliberate and less conscious or unconscious information practices of immigrants emphasizes the fact that immigrants are a population in transition struggling to deal with an unknown information environment. This is reflected in the academic LIS literature addressing the information practices of immigrants (Caidi, Allard, & Dechief, 2008; Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Chu, 1999; Courtright, 2005; Fisher, Durrance, & Bouch Hinton, 2004; Fisher, Marcoux, Miller, Sanchez, & Ramirez, 2004; Flythe, 2001; Holroyd, Taylor-Pilie, & Twinn, 2003; Jeong, 2004; Liu & Redford, 1997; Mehra & Papajohn, 2007; Metoyer-Duran, 1993; Silvio, 2006; Sligo & Jameson, 2000; Su & Conaway, 1995).
Another useful concept for understanding immigrants’ encounters with information is “information poverty” (Chatman, 1996, p. 197): Information seeking may be problematic for vulnerable populations in economic poverty as they also tend to suffer from information poverty. Information poverty is characterized as lacking necessary resources such as adequate social networks and information-finding skills that enable everyday life information seeking. It has been argued that among immigrant groups, new immigrants in particular can be characterized as information poor because they have not had time or opportunities to develop adequate local networks (in terms of both network size and access to resources), and they may not yet know how to navigate their new information environment.

There is, unfortunately, a lack of empirical studies that systematically explore how new immigrants seek and make use of information. The remainder of this section explores these issues: We first review the information needs of immigrants as outlined in the literature; we next explore the state of the research on how immigrants seek and use information (including pathways and sources accessed); then we discuss information sharing and other more expressive activities. We conclude with a discussion of the barriers and challenges to accessing information by this user group.1

**Characterizing the Information Needs of Immigrants**

In his overview of ELIS, Savolainen (1995, 2008) distinguishes between orienting and practical (i.e., problem-specific) information seeking in everyday contexts. Orienting information refers to the daily habits that individuals engage in as a means of monitoring everyday events through various sources, particularly the media. By contrast, the seeking of problem-specific information relates to the solving of individual problems or performing specific tasks (Savolainen, 2008, p. 83). These tend to be more episodic in nature (albeit with a clear starting point), but may present variations in terms of time to completion (i.e., until a solution is found or a problem is solved).

In some cases, however, the two modes are intertwined. For instance, systematic seeking of orienting information may help to solve specific problems. This seems to ring true particularly for immigrants. Indeed, the information needs (or gap in one’s knowledge about a particular subject) that immigrants (and especially newcomers) encounter and must resolve are numerous and complex and straddle orienting as well as problem-specific activities. The following examples are selected from studies that examine specific information needs of immigrants (all of which have also been identified as critical by the immigration and settlement literature).

**Orienting Information Seeking**

- Monitoring the environment for information about the new culture as well as orientation on “life in the new country” (George & Mwarigha, 1999)
- Information about cultural or religious events (Jeong, 2004; Su & Conoway, 1995)
• Political information and current events (including news about the country of origin) (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; Silvio, 2006)

• Information about broader societal contexts, including identity issues (Aizlewood & Doody, 2002; Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007).

In the early stages of settlement, newcomers will attempt to establish ways of monitoring everyday events through various information sources. These activities will depend in part on what their habits were in the country of origin (such as reading newspapers daily, watching television or listening to the radio, speaking to one’s doctor) or they may be specific to the new circumstances (e.g., they do not own a television yet, they may prefer to listen to radio or read the newspapers to familiarize themselves with the new environment, they may rely on informal support networks for understanding how things work or how to get things done). This process is not well documented in the LIS literature. Empirical and longitudinal studies can shed light on these processes and preferences for some information sources over others (e.g., print vs. online media, human sources, organizational sources) as well as how these preferences evolve over time as the immigrant becomes more established.

What is clear, however, is that barriers to seeking orienting information documented in previous studies also apply to immigrants, namely, struggling with information overload, difficulties in identifying where to gain access to information that is appropriate to their needs (and in this case, in a language that they can understand), and problems related to the credibility of information (Savolainen, 2008, p. 95). In addition, immigrants also face other specific difficulties such as emotional stress and social isolation stemming from being in a new environment, limited support networks, and/or a lack of financial stability.

Problem-Specific Information Seeking

• Language information (including information about training, translation, and interpretation services) (Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; George, Fong, Da, & Chang, 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999; George & Tsang, 2000; Su & Conaway, 1995)

• Employment information (including job searching skills and special services to foreign trained professionals) (Chu, 1999; Jensen, 2002; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; George et al., 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999; George & Tsang, 2000; Silvio, 2006)

• Information about making connections in the community (including connections to professional associations, volunteering opportunities, mentoring, and community organizations) (Caidi, Allard, Dechief, & Longford, 2008; Dechief, 2006; George et al., 2004)

• Housing information (George et al., 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999; George & Tsang, 2000; Prock, 2003)
• Health information (Cortinois, 2008; Courtright, 2005; George & Tsang, 2000; Jensen, 2002; Prock, 2003; Silvio, 2006; Su & Conaway, 1995)
• Information about workplace safety (Jensen, 2002; Prock, 2003)
• Legal information (Chu, 1999; Jensen, 2002; Prock, 2003; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004)
• Education-related information (Chu, 1999; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999; Silvio, 2006)
• Information about recreation (Chu, 1999; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; Su & Conaway, 1995)
• Information about transportation (Chu, 1999; Su & Conaway, 1995)
• Information about banking (Shoham & Strauss, 2007)

In the case of problem-specific information seeking, some of the barriers specified in the literature include identifying and accessing relevant human sources (for instance, in public sector organizations), the slowness of bureaucratic processes (e.g., it may take a long time to obtain a health card, a driver’s license, banking permissions) (Savolainen, 2008). These problems are compounded for immigrants, who are generally unfamiliar with the overall system in the new country (how things work) and may not know how or where to seek help in the new information environment.

Research that examines the information needs of immigrants tends to be conducted on particular ethno-cultural groups within particular settings. One reason, as has been suggested, is that it is difficult to generalize across immigrant groups (and even within them). However, we observe that in general the information needs of immigrants have remained relatively similar across immigrants’ source countries. This point is reiterated by George and colleagues (2004), who suggest that the needs and barriers faced by newcomer immigrant groups in the process of settlement do not differ greatly (George, 2002; George et al., 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999). Indeed, distinctions within ethno-cultural groups are often overlooked, resulting in the homogenization of diverse communities. Comparisons might usefully be drawn across such categories as age, gender, employment, socioeconomic conditions, and class of entry into source country. However, too few studies exist at this time to make such comparisons possible.

Another approach, advocated by Caidi, Allard, and Dechief (2008), is one that situates the information needs of immigrants along a continuum of settlement stages. Using Mwarigha’s (2002) stages of settlement model combined with George and colleagues’ (2004) work on pre-migration stages, the authors point out the usefulness of situating information needs along four (overlapping) stages: (1) the pre-migration stage (before the individual actually immigrates to the new country; information is then gathered from formal sources such as government agencies’ publications and websites, immigration lawyers or agencies, as well as informal sources such as family and friends, blogs, and online listservs); (2) the immediate stage (e.g., information about pressing needs for survival such as shelter, orientation to the new city, language instruction); (3) the intermediate stage (information needed
to access various local systems and institutions, such as municipal, legal, long-term housing, health, and employment services; and (4) the integrative stage (as immigrants become accustomed to their new country, their information needs are more diverse and may encompass the desire for increased political and civic participation).

Too few studies to date have examined information needs in the context of a settlement stages model; however, indications within current research suggest that this would be a beneficial approach. In a study of the pre-migration information flows of business migrants to New Zealand, Benson-Rea and Rawlinson (2003) suggest that pre-migration information is an essential component of the immigration and settlement process and that pre-migration information is often found to be insufficient in terms of both quantity and content, thus increasing difficulties during the settlement process. In their exploration of the information needs of new North American immigrants to Israel, Shoham and Strauss (2007) identified which channels of information were used by the immigrants before and after immigration to try to satisfy their needs. Many of these needs were satisfied either prior to immigration or during the absorption process; others were not, leaving the immigrants with gaps in their knowledge, feelings of uncertainty, and, at times, anxiety. According to the authors, during the preparations for immigration, the greatest source of information came from the Internet. After immigration, word-of-mouth and personal contacts were the main sources used by these immigrants to satisfy their information needs. Studies from social work that focus specifically on immigrant settlement also highlight specific information needs and their urgency during the settlement period (George, 2002; George, et al., 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999).

A review of the literature suggests that settlement information (particularly at the pre-migration and immediate stages) generally tends to include more time-sensitive and critical information such as housing and employment information; non-settlement-related needs (at the intermediate and integrative stages) are broader in scope (Caidi, Allard, & Dechief, 2008). Access to leisure materials is an example. Cuesta (1990), To (1995), and Flythe (2001) all identify differences in reading patterns across the settlement process. Upon arrival, newcomers are significantly busier and are most likely to read instructional resources (e.g., language improvement; material about the local community or about finding and applying for employment) (To, 1995). At this stage, their reading practices are designed to help them settle in a new country. As they adjust to their new life, they are more likely to read more broadly (e.g., novels, “self-help,” “how-to,” and other leisure material) (Cuesta, 1990). In her examination of Hispanic populations’ use of public library reading materials in the U.S., Cuesta (1990, p. 27) argues that immigrant reading needs become more varied “as their attention turns to enhancement of their daily lives.” Magazines and newspapers from the source country and in their mother tongue are read at all stages of the immigrant process as are documents written in immigrants’ first language.

**Pathways and Sources**

Particularly important aspects of the information activities of immigrants are the identification and use of pathways (deliberate and happenstance) by which they find the sources they choose to consult in their information seeking process. The concept of information pathways was first proposed by Johnson and colleagues
(2006) and may be understood as the route someone follows in the pursuit of answers to questions within one’s information environment (what Johnson and colleagues [p. 571] refer to as “information fields”). Information pathways are a dynamic and active means of accessing information.

Immigrants commonly make use of multiple sources and pathways. The next section identifies a set of commonly identified sources, which we group in four categories: social networks, formal sources (organizations), information and communication technologies, and ethnic media.

Social Networks

Researchers in the field of LIS and elsewhere have pointed to the importance of social networks as sources of information for so-called vulnerable or marginalized populations (Birkel & Repucci, 1983; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; Flythe, 2001; Gollop, 1997; Liu, 1995). Like most people, it appears that immigrants are most likely to ask other individuals for help as the first step when seeking information (Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004; Shoham & Strauss, 2007; Silvio, 2006). Research indicates that they rely on strong ties or people with whom they have close personal relationships such as family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers (Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004; Jeong, 2004). They also tend to rely on weak ties or people who are not particularly close to them such as settlement workers and government employees (Courtright, 2005). Likewise, studies in the immigration literature examine how strong ties in ethnic and immigrant communities within the receiving country contribute to social capital formation in the form of aid, social support, and reciprocity (Nee & Sanders, 2001; Portes & Bach, 1985; Salaff & Greve, 2004; Waters, 2003).

Courtright’s (2005) study of the social networking practices of Latino newcomers in the U.S. seeking health information points to the use of both strong and weak social ties. She found that immigrant newcomers will initially rely on family, friends, and co-workers (their strong ties) for health information. The information that comes from these strong ties is often inadequate. However, family and friends are frequently able to put newcomers in contact with weak ties such as health care or settlement workers (within the family’s or friend’s network); these weak ties are often able to provide newcomers with adequate information.

Gatekeepers have also been identified as an important local source of information in ethnically diverse communities (Agada, 1999; Chatman, 1987; Chu, 1999; Metoyer-Duran, 1991, 1993; Stavri, 2001). Chu (1999) refers to ethnolinguistic gatekeepers as those individuals who are able to operate within two or more speech communities because they speak both the first language of the group and the official language(s) of the host country. Ethnolinguistic gatekeepers provide links between communities through their ability to access and disseminate information. These gatekeepers need not be professionals or linked to formal sources; rather they can play this gatekeeping role in an informal or personal capacity.

Metoyer-Duran’s (1991, 1993) studies of the role that information gatekeepers play in various ethnolinguistic communities in California led her to develop a taxonomy of gatekeepers based on cognitive theoretical work, taking into account concept usage, data usage, and affect as key dimensions characterizing gatekeepers. Six gatekeeper profiles emerged from her work (impeder, broker, unaffiliated gatekeeper, affiliated gatekeeper, information professional, and leader-executive).
Metoyer-Duran’s findings suggest that ethnolinguistic gatekeepers are generally knowledgeable about information access. They are often called upon to provide or find information for community members and are able to harness the power of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate this role. In her study of personal health information seeking, Stavri (2001) built on Metoyer-Duran’s framework and incorporated another category of gatekeepers: those who act as translators of medical terminology into lay language for those individuals who are confused by the language and concepts used by an unfamiliar (and possibly intimidating) medical establishment.

Gatekeepers can also interfere with access to information and introduce bias. In his study of Korean international graduate students residing in the U.S., Jeong (2004) identifies a Korean clergyman as an information gatekeeper for students. At times the clergyman limits what information is made available to the students and also provides inaccurate information. Chu (1999) examines how immigrant children act as information mediators for their families, often information mediators for their parents, because they are likely to develop English language skills more quickly. Chu argues that when children become responsible for identifying and collecting information for family use, this may result in poor information choices and retrieval because children tend to have less sophisticated information seeking and evaluation techniques than do adults.

Some immigrant communities rely on social networks for information (particularly close ties such as well known community members, family, and friends) as trust appears to play a large role in information uptake and use. According to Silvio (2006), most Sudanese youth who immigrate to Canada with their families to escape civil war and find a better life prefer easily accessible informal sources such as trusted friends, relatives, and co-workers. Fisher, Marcoux, and colleagues’ (2004) examination of low income Hispanic farm migrants reveals that they also prefer to use trusted informal sources for their information needs such as family and friends who emigrated to the region months or years earlier. If information is not readily available through these sources, they will not pursue it. Fisher and colleague’s (2004, p. 9) findings suggest that, “in social networking terms, [immigrants] want to create strong ties from their invaluable weak ties.” Strong ties are used for both information seeking and social support. In a study of female newcomers’ access to primary mental health care, Hynie and colleagues also reported family and friends as being the principal sources of support for these women, along with community members who were often cited as the main sources of informational support (Crooks, Hynie, Killian, Giesbrecht, & Castleden, in press).

It is important, however, not to assume that trust issues apply only to so-called “vulnerable immigrants.” For example, international university students, in Liu and Redfern’s (1997) study, indicated that they were reluctant to use the reference desk at the university library because they were afraid that their English was not good enough either to ask a question or to understand the response. Reluctance to use the reference desk may indicate a mistrust of “outsiders” and their willingness to be tolerant or understanding of language difficulties. Because issues of trust play a significant role in preventing immigrants from accessing necessary information, it is evident that more research is needed on trust-building and related issues.
Immigrants are also known to retain social networks with individuals from the source country. Although immigrants may have difficulty accessing information sources within their new countries, they may have access to transnational network ties not available to non-immigrants. Examples of transnational ties include: collecting pre-migration information from family and friends who have migrated (Wong & Salaff, 1998), transnational entrepreneurship (Wong, 2004), providing or receiving employment and other referrals from individuals abroad (Kennedy, 2004), and locating health and other information from and for family and friends abroad (Faist, 2000). Additionally, transnational sources such as online language newspapers and websites are regularly consulted by immigrants (Aizlewood & Doody, 2002; Caidi & MacDonald, 2008).

Within LIS, there is little research that directly examines the transnational ties of immigrants. Srinivasan and Pyati (2007, p. 1734) acknowledge that there is much to be learned from “recognizing the place-based, lived realities of immigrant communities while also acknowledging the existence of complex, globalized, diasporic information environments.” They propose a new model for dealing with these complexities called the Diasporic Information Environment Model (DIEM). This identifies several research methods that have the potential to advance our understanding of the relationships among the local context of immigrants’ everyday lives (including their information practices) and their diasporic and transnational online activities as well as their identity practices. Because so little research exists in this area, it remains to be seen whether and how this model can shed light on the local and transnational information activities adopted by immigrants.

Formal Sources

Formal organizations such as settlement agencies, government departments, community centers, ethno-cultural organizations, libraries, and other service providers (Flythe, 2001; George & Mwarigha, 1999; George & Tsang, 2000) are also important sources of information for immigrants. For instance, the LIS literature abounds with studies about how public and academic libraries act as spaces for both formal and informal information gathering by immigrants (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Chu, 1999; Dali, 2004, 2005; Dilevko & Dali, 2002; Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004; Liu & Redfern, 1997; Luévano-Molina, 2001; Quirke, 2006; Shoham & Rabinovich, 2008). Indeed, libraries promote information sharing because information tends to travel informally in spaces where people meet, a phenomenon referred to as “information grounds.” An information ground has been defined by Fisher (née Pettigrew, 1999, p. 811) as “an environment temporarily created by the behavior of people who have come together to perform a given task, but from which emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information.”

More research is needed into what types of information grounds exist for immigrants, or which venues become a de facto information ground for them, for example, bowling alleys, grocery stores, or churches. In their study of Hispanic migrant workers, Fisher, Marcoux, and colleagues (2004) identify church, school, and the workplace as sites where information spontaneously traveled among participants. Fisher, Durrance, and Bouch Hinton (2004) examine how literacy and coping skills programs at the Queen’s Borough Public Library act as an information ground for
immigrants by helping meet their psychological, social, and practical needs. They identify four building blocks in immigrants’ perceptions of the public library: (1) discovery of the library and experience of its safe and accommodating environment, (2) awareness of the resources available and acquisition of library skills, (3) telling family and friends about how libraries can help them, and (4) learning to trust library staff (Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004, p. 760). Immigrants experienced each of these steps as they incorporated the public library into their daily lives. Bordanaro (2006) describes how university libraries act as informal spaces for international students to develop their English language skills through self-directed learning and practice. Her study indicates that international students use the library as a practice space to engage in second language speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Although most LIS research examines the contemporary role of the library in providing services to immigrants, a small body of literature documents and explores the historical role played by these services (Jones, 1999; Novotny, 2003; Pokorny, 2003). Scholarly research within LIS has also examined how the library, in particular, responds to immigrants’ information needs (Chu, 1999; Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004; Liu & Redfern, 1997; To, 1995). In addition, there is a vast body of practitioner-based literature that documents how libraries are currently serving or should serve immigrants (Cunningham, 2004; Dezarn, 2008; Hickok, 2005; Jang, 2004; Jensen, 2002; Jonsson-Lanevska, 2005; McGowen, 2008; Mylopoulos, 2004; Nedlina, 2007; Orange, 2004; O’Toole, 2005; Prock, 2003; Vander Kooy, 2004; Vang, 2003; Virgilio, 2003; Zhang, 2001).

Practitioner-based LIS literature deals primarily with issues relating to the design and delivery of library services to immigrant patrons and also identifies underserved populations and gaps in services. It consists of primarily descriptive articles, often written by practitioners based on an assessment of their library’s services and/or user groups. For example, Prock (2003) describes the information needs of migrant farm workers and Jensen (2002) examines day laborers. Both of these groups are historically underserved library populations with very particular information needs. Cuesta (1990), on the other hand, explores the reading habits of Hispanic immigrants at the public library. In these and other examples, the challenge for libraries seems to be in striking the proper balance between the specific needs of immigrants and the library’s mandate to serve the general population.

Libraries are but one of many organizations that provide formal information services targeted at immigrants; others include community organizations, social service agencies, government agencies, employment centers, settlement agencies, language training centres, ethno-cultural organizations, immigrant organizations, professional associations, and schools. For instance, Dechief (2006) explores the role that community networks play in the social and economic inclusion of immigrants. She argues that although newcomers initially go to community networks to make use of their publicly available ICT terminals and services, they often become volunteers at these organizations (in her study, the Vancouver Community Network). Through volunteering, immigrants acquire local work experience and increase local social networks that contribute to civic participation and finding employment.
In his study of 211 Toronto, a free information and referral service, Cortinois (2008) reports that the participants deemed the service extremely useful, although the majority of respondents did not learn about it immediately after arrival. For these immigrants, learning about 211 Toronto had been accidental, as for the most part, they had never before experienced anything similar and therefore could not even conceptualize the existence of such a service. Cortinois reports that even after learning about 211 Toronto, and sometimes even after using it several times, most participants did not know very much about the service, how it worked, and the types of information it offered. However, the respondents reported that 211 Toronto counselors’ friendly and respectful attitude, the fact that they spoke their language, and the precision and usefulness of the information they gave were the most important reasons for them to trust the service and keep returning to it (p. 219).

Information and Communication Technologies

Information and communication technologies, such as computers and the Internet (Aizlewood & Doody, 2002; Mehra & Papajohn, 2007; Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007) but also mobile phones, radio, television, and satellite systems (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Lee, 2004; Naficy, 2003; Roald, 2004; Shoham & Stam, 2001; Shoham & Strauss, 2007), are significant information sources for immigrants. Indeed, they play a pivotal role in the shifts taking place within immigration by providing accessible cultural media such as online local newspapers in languages other than the official language, newsgroups, chat rooms, and home country Internet sites (Aizlewood & Doody, 2002).

Technology is one of the main facilitators of transnational practices because it allows for relatively easy and rapid communication across great distances. For example, Vertovec (2004) explores how the proliferation of inexpensive phone cards has contributed to transnational contact. Uy-Tioco (2007) describes how text messaging allows overseas Filipina workers to parent from abroad. Transnational entrepreneurial opportunities are also facilitated through ICTs (Chen & Wellman, 2007; Salaff & Greve, 2004; Wong, 2004). Additionally, immigrants often participate in the civic and political life of their home countries via online newspapers, the Internet, and telephone (Guarnizo et al., 2003).

Within the LIS literature, not much research examines how ICTs fit within the information behaviors of immigrants. In their study of international students, Mehra and Papajohn (2007) describe how ICTs are used as part of this group’s information practices, spanning both local and transnational environments. They describe how International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) use the Internet for “glocal” (both local and global) information activities. Their study found that, among ITAs, e-mail and the telephone were the preferred means for both communication with the home country and finding information in the U.S. This study also indicated that students who spent more time engaging in social activities on campus also spent more time engaging in online activities, such as chatrooms, listservs, newsgroups, and audio/videoconferences (p. 26). Viewed from this perspective, the Internet is a potentially valuable tool for fostering both local and transnational networks.

Chien’s research (2005) examines Settlement.Org, a Toronto based website produced by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) that provides settlement information to newcomers. She studied the uses of Settlement.Org’s
online bulletin board by immigrants and argues that, in addition to informing immigrants, the board helps involve them in Canadian life by connecting them to other individuals (both immigrants and Canadian-born) and by allowing them to contribute content, share opinions and stories, and give advice to others. She also observes that newcomers often have blogs in their first languages directed to others who are contemplating emigrating from a shared home country. Not only do immigrants find information from these sources but they are a significant locus of engagement and social networking for both content contributors and information seekers before and after arrival.

A report on the role played by ICTs in fostering social inclusion, commissioned by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (Caidi, Allard, Dechief, & Longford, 2008), documents how publicly available ICTs are used by immigrants at non-profit institutions such as community networks (CNs), settlement agencies, and public libraries. Their findings demonstrate that employment-related activities are among the main reasons immigrants use ICTs at these locations. Indeed, new immigrants are very busy making ends meet and have to make strategic use of their time in public settings where computers and other information and settlement resources are available. The report indicates that ICTs may be used for a variety of other purposes, such as for communicating with family and friends in the home country and accessing various online media in multiple languages. In addition to the fact that social networks are necessary for information seeking, information seeking itself (using a variety of pathways including ICTs, weak network ties, and formal organizations such as libraries and community networks) promotes the development of much needed local social networks for immigrants.

Caidi, Allard, Dechief, and Longford’s (2008) findings also suggest that the prevalence of the Internet may not necessarily be beneficial to all immigrants because it creates barriers to access. Bureaucratic structures and online interfaces, for instance, may prove difficult to navigate for new users who are unfamiliar with the Canadian system or whose first language is not English. In other words, ICTs have the potential to create opportunities for immigrants (in terms of accessing information and media, and communicating locally and transnationally) but more research is needed to identify how ICTs act as both barrier and opportunity for immigrant communities.

Ethnic Media

Computers and the Internet remain significant sources of information for immigrants but more traditional media, including ethnic media, are also heavily used. Satellite TV, local minority language newspapers and radio, and international websites are all examples of such media (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Cormack & Hourigan, 2007; Flythe, 2001; Joh, Yue, Hawkins, Pookong, & Fox, 2001; Karim, 2003; Moon & Park, 2007; Su & Conaway, 1995; Viswanath & Arora, 2000). Studies also highlight the use of non-English language print and broadcast media of both local and international origin. These resources appear to be a significant source of information for both newcomers and longer established immigrants (Karanfil, 2007; Lee, 2004; Lin & Song, 2006). Most of the research within this area emerges from communication studies as well as the immigration and settlement studies literature more generally.
Examples include how ethnic local newspapers are used to keep track of events in both the source country and the local neighborhood (Lin & Song, 2006). As such, they act to promote connections abroad and locally. Another example examines how the proliferation of satellite TV is contributing to transnational contact (Karanfil, 2007; Lee, 2004). In this instance, immigrants appear to prefer to watch news programs from their countries of origin, indicating a keen interest in what is going on in those countries (Karanfil, 2007; Lee, 2004).

Aizlewood and Doody (2002) found that immigrant Internet users can be divided into two categories: those who maintain and those who explore their ethno-cultural identity. The former tend to be immigrants, particularly recently-arrived immigrants. Maintenance occurs through frequent communication with others within their ethno-cultural group through newsgroups, chat rooms, and e-mail. Online newspapers and other Web-based media are also consumed. Among the latter are those “who have more indirect ties to their background, perhaps through a parent or grandparent” (p. 3), for example, first and second generation immigrants. They use the Internet to find information about their cultural heritage in an attempt to reclaim their roots and learn more about the associated traditions and practices.

Srinivasan and Pyati (2007, p. 1734) refer to the proliferation of ethnic media online as “e-diaspora,” suggesting that immigrants’ experience with transnational identities in an online environment has an effect on their (offline) lived realities and communities. Mitra (2006) and Wenjing (2005) both describe how virtual spaces such as websites are used to create unique immigrant identities. In both studies, the development and maintenance of identity motivates information practice. Mitra (2006) argues that immigrants of Indian origin use Indian websites as safe spaces where they can express themselves freely. Wenjing argues that Chinese diasporic websites allow Chinese immigrants to maintain their Chinese identities while creating new identities based on experiences in their new countries.

Caidi and MacDonald (2008) examine Canadian Muslims and how their information practices mediate and shape their experiences and sense of belonging in Canada. The findings point to an interesting—if not surprising—paradox between the respondents’ lack of confidence in fair reporting on Islam and Muslims in the local media after 9/11, along with an increased awareness and consumption of media objects (both local and ethnic) by the population sampled. The users are depicted as avid consumers of information in various forms and in different languages, thus exposing them to a variety of perspectives on events that unfold in the world around them (p. 359). In addition to the more generic uses of the Internet and computers, there are specific uses, such as accessing websites in languages other than English or visiting sites that are tailored to groups belonging to a particular cultural group or religious affiliation (p. 360).

**Information Sharing and Expressive Information Activities**

Most research on the information practices of immigrants tends to focus on the identification of task-based information activities (Chu, 1999; Flythe, 2001; Prock, 2003; Silvio, 2006; Su & Conaway, 1995). The social and communicative dimensions of information activities (including information sharing) have been described less often, or in the context of spaces or places where people meet formally or
informally. In their study of Hispanic migrant workers, Fisher, Marcoux, and colleagues (2004) identify church, school, and the workplace as sites where information spontaneously circulated among participants. More research is needed into which venues become a de facto information ground—bowling alleys, grocery stores, churches.

As is evident from the previous sections, immigrants’ information practices are not simply straightforward plans designed to acquire particular pieces of information. Indeed, when the term “information practices” is expanded to include non-directed activities such as media browsing or communication with the home country, it becomes obvious that information practices are about more than finding instrumental information—information with which to complete a task. Information practices also comprise more expressive or communicative activities. These activities, which often have a phatic function (i.e., small talk or informal activities that open up a social channel and can lead to more substantial or focused communication) are not often accounted for in discussions of immigrants’ information practices. Indeed, expressive information activities are not as well documented although concepts such as informal support networks or information grounds acknowledge the conversational and serendipitous nature of information transfer and uptake.

Mehra and Papajohn (2007) argue that there is a significant link between emotional well-being, cultural understanding, and information practices. International students in their study use the Internet to maintain transnational contacts because they perceive the Internet as providing “significant social and psychological/emotional benefits in the process of maintaining communication to the home country” (p. 26). These authors interpret communicating with home as an information practice because the emotional support derived from transnational ties contributes (in terms of psychological comfort and overcoming isolation) to their ability to understand and function within U.S. culture, which is an alien information environment.

Caidi and MacDonald (2008) examine Canadian Muslims (the majority of whom had been in the country for an average of nine years) and how their information practices mediate and shape their experiences and sense of belonging in Canada. The authors note the keen interest in news items (world news, home country news, Canadian news, local news) and the strong transnational ties held and maintained by many respondents (e.g., they may have families living in other parts of the world, they may be newcomers themselves or foreign students, or seek information sources from other parts of the globe). The authors show that the information practices of their sample contribute to shaping their sense of belonging (or not) in Canadian society in the post-9/11 world. The authors also note a significant level of sophistication shown by the participants in their understanding of the importance of accessing multiple and varied sources of information and making sense of the content as well as the context of production of the information. The search for a variety of trusted information sources seems to be related to the needs of these individuals to question and negotiate their sense of identity and what it means to be a Muslim in Canada.

Apart from the LIS literature there is a growing body of research underway that sheds light on the relationship between information practices (although not always identified as such) and cultural identity formation and negotiation. For
instance, Sampredo (1998) illustrates how immigrants use transnational ties to create connections or feelings of closeness with their home country. He observes that daily newspapers are read for reasons other than information collection; they are consumed to create symbolic closeness with the home country. Mitra (2006) and Wenjing (2005) both describe how virtual spaces such as websites are used to create unique immigrant identities. In both studies, the development and maintenance of identity practices motivate or underlie the information activities.

The use of ICTs has also emerged as a possible alternative in Cortinois’s (2008) study of health information seeking by immigrants. He suggests that information and communication technologies could be used to support a virtual community of users, built on the Wikipedia model, aimed at maximizing the efficiency and impact of the casual “information chains” employed and described by his respondents (p. 225). In this way, informal support networks that are key to information sharing can benefit a broader range of individuals, provided these have access to ICTs and have the skills and know-how to access the resources.

**Barriers and Challenges to Information Practices**

Multiple barriers prevent immigrants from finding information upon arrival in their new country. The literature identifies both structural and social barriers. Structural barriers include language proficiency, learning how systems work (i.e., the settlement and immigration process), and limitations arising from one’s immigration status. Social barriers include, among other things, social isolation, differences in cultural values or understandings, and communication problems. We review these here:

**Structural Barriers to Accessing Information**

**Insufficient Language Proficiency**

One of the most significant barriers that new immigrants appear to face is lack of language proficiency or insufficient language proficiency (Cortinois, 2008; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; George & Mwarigha, 1999; George & Tsang, 2000; Jeong, 2004; Silvio, 2006; Stavri, 2001; Su & Conaway, 1995). In studies by Cortinois (2008) as well as Crooks and colleagues (in press), language was confirmed as the most fundamental barrier experienced by participants when accessing health services. In addition to not being able to speak or understand the official language(s) of their new country, some immigrants are reluctant to speak English even when they understand it (Liu & Redfern, 1997). In a similar vein, Fisher, Marcoux, and colleagues’ (2004) examination of low income Hispanic farm migrants reveals that respondents prefer to use trusted Spanish speaking sources for their information needs. Because language is the largest barrier for this group, Spanish language radio and community organizations are the preferred information sources. Other important information sources are family and friends who emigrated to the region months or years earlier.

**Learning How the System Works**
Learning how the system works includes lack of familiarity with receiving country information sources; lack of knowledge about how to navigate the local information environment; not knowing what services are available or how to ask for services; and literacy issues (Chu, 1999; Caidi & Allard, 2005; Caidi, Allard, Dechief, & Longford, 2008; Cortinois, 2008; Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004; Prock, 2003; Shoham & Strauss, 2008; Stavri, 2001; Su & Conaway, 1995). Many immigrants face significant challenges in finding appropriate information after they enter the new country. In the case of personal health information seeking, the barriers include being too busy to take care of one’s self, being unfamiliar with health information sources and the health care system in their new country, language barriers, dismissive attitudes on the part of some health care providers, and inadequate support networks (Cortinois, 2008; Courtright, 2005; Crooks et al., in press; Holroyd, Taylor-Piliae, & Twinn, 2003; Stavri, 2001). Courtright’s (2005) study of Latino newcomers in the U.S. also indicates that they prefer human sources from which to acquire health information and do not use the Internet to locate health information. Cortinois (2008) reported that the immigrants in his sample arrived in Canada with expectations that in most cases clashed with the reality they encountered. In some cases they did not find what they were hoping for; in others they found resources and services with which they were not familiar. These included services that were conceptually so remote from what they had experienced in their countries of origin as to be virtually invisible. That was probably one of the reasons most participants had discovered 211 Toronto only late in the resettlement process (p. 224).

Several articles illustrate that in order to communicate information adequately to newcomers, it is necessary to be able to put it in their terms (Stavri, 2001). For example, Allen, Matthew, and Boland (2004) describe the relative lack of medical terminology in the Hmong language. Communicating medical concepts is therefore accomplished by translating Western biomedical models of health into the Hmong language using words and concepts of health, well-being, and death understood by the Hmong.

Another significant barrier to health information access is the language in which written health information is published. Immigrant groups in Ahmad, Shik, Vanza, Cheung, George, and Stewart’s (2004) study stated that they wanted health information in their first language through ethnic newspapers, television, Internet, workshops, health workers, pamphlets, and displays at family physician clinics. Sun, Zang, Tsoh, Wong-Kim, and Chow (2007) determine that, because of the low English health literacy rates among Chinese immigrant women in San Francisco, media campaigns in both Cantonese and Mandarin using local Chinese media proved successful in promoting breast health to this demographic.

**Limitations Arising from One’s Immigration Status**

Depending on one’s status, access to resources or services may not be possible. For instance, in Canada, even legally landed immigrants cannot obtain public health care for the first three months after their arrival. It has been well documented that on average, immigrants tend to be in better health than the average Canadian before they immigrate. However, their health usually deteriorates rapidly due in part to lack of social support, mental distress, social isolation, and lack of financial stability (Morrow, 2003; Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). Being unable to access
health care services in their first three months, these individuals have to seek alternative options and sources of information on health.

The problem is compounded for refugee claimants or undocumented immigrants. They cannot access many services because of their status (or lack thereof). There is also the problem of stigma that weighs on certain individuals. In their study of female newcomers’ access to primary mental health care, Crooks and colleagues (in press) report that many of these women (many of whom were refugees) would refrain from seeking information and help for a variety of reasons having to do with hiding their true condition (being depressed or sad was not socially accepted) or out of fear that such information would jeopardize their immigration proceedings (if it were to be made publicly available or recorded on one’s file). As Chatman (2000, p. 7) noted in her discussion of information poverty, “when concerns and problems present themselves and when information is recognized as potentially helpful but is ignored, individuals live in an impoverished information world.” More formal support services, regardless of language or immigration status, are desirable but this can be achieved only if service providers receive adequate resources and training.

**Social Barriers to Accessing Information**

**Social Isolation**

Social isolation includes the sense of being an outsider, lack of support, and mistrust of others (Caidi & MacDonald, 2008; Chatman 1996; Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004; George & Tsang, 2000; Prock, 2003; Silvio, 2006; Sligo & Jameson, 2000). Resettlement in a new country can be a deeply traumatic experience, particularly in the case of forced migration (as is the case for many refugees). The reality of resettlement includes the emotional shock of relocation; linguistic and cultural barriers of all types; and the need to solve multiple, complex, and intertwined tasks while attempting to navigate an unfamiliar environment without any support networks along the way (Cortinois, 2008, p. 224). Hence the importance of having access to reliable, consistent, and comprehensive information on a broad spectrum of subjects (ranging from how to use the public transportation system, to the cardinal reference system for finding one’s way across the city, to critical information such as health or employment-related information (Asanin & Wilson, 2008). Lack of social support and mistrust of others may lead immigrants to feel isolated and emotionally distressed (Morrow, 2003; Pumariega et al., 2005).

**Communication Problems**

Negative experiences with a service provider or a system (e.g., health care) can have devastating consequences on an immigrant’s settlement process and overall well-being. Examples of problems identified by Cortinois (2008, p. 233) in the context of immigrants’ health information seeking include: the difficulty of finding a family physician; rushed consultations; providers’ unfriendly, unsympathetic, dismissive attitudes; long waiting times at hospital emergency departments and in securing appointments with specialists; challenges in learning and understanding health care practices in Canada; and, more important than any other barrier, communication problems with providers.
Communication problems can occur at any point of the exchange and involve both parties: the user (patron, patient) may be frustrated with the (seemingly) impersonal nature of the transaction with the service provider. He/she may not feel that the person has probed enough or does not appear to care about the individual’s concerns. By contrast, the provider may mistake the individual’s aloofness and reserved attitude for passivity (he/she is not volunteering information). In some cases, a provider may only ask questions or probe deeper when there are resources or time to deal with the answer (Crooks et al., in press).

Moreover, research suggests that certain information (such as that about health) is often presented to immigrant groups in a way that can be significantly different from how these individuals envision the world and how they relate to such matters as health or illness—for instance, faith may not play a significant role in the mode of operating of the host country’s health care model. Immigrants generally acquire less quality health care information and underutilize the health care system in their new country (Cortinois, 2008; Courtright, 2005; Holroyd et al., 2003). It is commonly thought that one of the main reasons for this state of affairs is that immigrants “experience clashes between their ethnocultural or religious beliefs and Western medical care” (Weerasinghe, 2000, p. 11). Different understandings of health, illness, and treatment often lead to communication problems and immigrant dissatisfaction with the health care system. In addition to varying beliefs about health and illness, cultural norms about appropriate behavior may play a large role in the health information practices of certain immigrant groups. For example, Sligo and Jameson (2000) argue that concern about what other community members will think of them prevents Pacific Island immigrants to New Zealand from getting cervical smears as reproductive health is a taboo area. They argue therefore that health information providers should take cultural differences into consideration when designing services. The use of insider endorsements may be employed to address cultural norms and taboos. Indeed, insiders have authority that outsiders do not because they are part of the group and are understood to share the same values and belief system as the group (Chatman, 1996; Sligo & Jameson, 2000).

There is a need to address ways in which communication can be facilitated between service providers and community members. In particular, the mistrust and alienation within communities needs to be addressed. One way is to work with gatekeepers or to facilitate foreign-trained professionals who can act as mediators because of their knowledge of the language, cultural systems, and communication practices of the new immigrants’ country of origin as well as that of the host country. Rather than the occasional cross-cultural competencies workshops and one-time efforts to teach service providers about the importance of cross-cultural communication, there seems to be a need for a more holistic approach that takes into account how professionals in various sectors are trained to deal with the reality of cultural diversity in their local settings.

**Differences in Cultural Values or Understandings**

Lack of cultural relevance may pose a significant barrier to information access for immigrants (George et al., 2004; Srinivasan, 2007). It is a topic that emerges in various areas related to this subject. As illustrated earlier, examining the health information practices of immigrants provides an excellent example of the need to iden-
tify cultural distinctions between and among immigrant groups and provide culturally relevant services, particularly where information may be sensitive. Indeed, lack of cultural relevance may represent a significant barrier to information uptake and retrieval. For example, cultural relevance may affect an individual’s willingness to visit the library, use ICTs, or simply accept information provided from someone outside his or her cultural group. The development of information systems within the context of culturally differentiated communities has been researched by Srinivasan (2006, 2007) and Srinivasan and Pyati (2007) among others.

Srinivasan’s (2007) research on Tribal Peace, a cultural information system designed by and for members of Native American reservations in California, illustrates how an information system can be developed to engage communities to develop their socioeconomic, educational, and cultural infrastructures. This and similar research illustrates how an analysis of communities’ cultural practices (immigrant and otherwise) can be used as guiding points for designing an information system’s architecture, particularly with respect to how it represents, categorizes, and disseminates the information it stores.

Lenhart, Horrigan, Rainie, Allen, Boyce, Madden, and colleagues’ (2003) study of the barriers to Internet access shows that what a person thinks of the Internet affects use. Similarly, cross-cultural metaphors of ICTs have not been heavily studied, although much can be learned from them. Duncker’s (2002) study of digital libraries and computing metaphors among the Maori in New Zealand suggests that metaphors are deeply rooted in cultural practices and, as such, should be an integral part of information systems design. Previous research on the use of Internet search tools (Iivonen & White, 2001) has shown differences in how users from different cultural groups search for information. These differences in behavior have implications for cross-cultural usability and the design of information resources and services for culturally diverse groups (Bilal & Bachir, 2007a, 2007b; Komlodi, Caidi, & Wheeler, 2004; Smith, 2006).

It should be noted, however, that most of the studies examined focused on the information practices of low-income groups. The barriers they identify may not be entirely representative of less vulnerable immigrants, such as those with financial means.

Conclusions and Future Directions

This review has examined several key concepts drawn from the LIS literature and beyond that can be used to frame both current and future research on the needs and uses of information by immigrants. It becomes clear from this chapter that, in spite of numerous gaps, there is an increasingly rich and useful body of literature from a wide range of disciplines that examines (directly or indirectly) the information practices of immigrants.

From our review, it is clear that communication barriers, lack of knowledge of the host country, poor socioeconomic and family networks, and lack of recognition of foreign educational or professional credentials are some of the established causes of social exclusion by immigrants (Weerasinghe, 2000). All of these issues are, to some extent, problems caused by a lack of relevant information. We therefore conclude this overview of the literature by reiterating what we have suggested earlier: Social exclu-
sion may well be an information problem, caused in part by the significant barriers immigrants face as they navigate an unknown information environment.

In order to understand better the information practices of immigrants, a holistic approach is advocated to encourage a closer examination of the relationships among social inclusion, the everyday life context of both new and longer established immigrants, and their information practices (Caidi & Allard, 2005). Indeed, assessing the contextual and situational factors constituting the information environments that define the information practices of immigrants is essential.

In spite of the importance of information for immigration and settlement purposes, studies on the information practices (including information seeking, use, and sharing) of immigrants tend to take a narrow approach, focusing on specific demographics or contexts. Although these approaches are extremely valuable, more research is needed that draws conclusions across the various small studies. We conclude this chapter by highlighting several research gaps; (and therefore research opportunities) identified in the literature and propose an agenda for future research.

Examing Immigrant Demographics

More research is needed that compares the information practices of various types of immigrants, most notably differences between newcomers and longer established immigrants. Similarly, more research is needed that identifies the differences between immigrants and refugees, and between different classes of immigrants (skilled workers, family class, entrepreneurs, etc.). It should be noted that we found very few studies that examined the information practices of business or economic class immigrants (Chen & Wellman, 2007; Wong & Ng, 2002). Comparing immigrants living in urban and rural or isolated settings is also a much needed area of research. Furthermore, the effects of age (e.g., generational gaps, specific needs of seniors or youth), along with gender differences, socioeconomic status, and even race may also be factors to consider in order to obtain a more robust understanding of the immigration and settlement process.

Research on Specific Information Needs

This review identified relatively few studies that focus on specific types of information needs (with the notable exception of health information). More research on information needs and uses in other settlement-related areas (e.g., employment, housing, leisure) along with comparisons between them is needed. One of the most significant information needs a newcomer faces has to do with finding employment (George et al., 2004). However, no studies within the information literature specifically address how immigrants find employment or make use of employment information to secure work.

Although we found some evidence that information needs do change across the settlement process, more empirical studies and longitudinal approaches (i.e., immigrants’ information needs across stages of immigration or the life course lens) would contribute greatly to our understanding of how newcomers and longer-established immigrants find the information they need at different stages of settlement and in the context of their daily lives. Current studies might also make use of the data they col-
lect differently. Most studies we examined did identify when newcomers arrived; however, they did not explore information practices in the light of these data.

**Research on Expressive Information Activities**

Most LIS research examines the specific task-based information needs of immigrants. This is particularly important as instrumental information needs are especially crucial and numerous during the settlement process. However, there is an opportunity for those who wish to examine the information practices of immigrants to cast a wider net and explore the relationship between information and communication activities. The heavy reliance on informal sources by immigrants calls for more research on ways of supporting informal networks. Informal networks have proved crucial for information access, dissemination, and information sharing (although so much relies on luck, such as whom one meets, from whom one rents, how helpful and proactive people in one’s immediate environment are). A better understanding of the role of these informal support networks, their dynamics, and their role in information sharing will have implications for how community agencies provide more active support and help in building such community networks and support groups.

Other expressive information activities include identity formation and negotiation by newcomers and longer established immigrants (including hybrid citizenship) and their conceptualization of inclusion and belonging in a new country.

**Research on ICTs**

Little research exists about the use of information and communication technologies for information seeking and use. What we did find was largely based in a Canadian context. We simply do not have enough data about how immigrants make use of the Internet at home and in public spaces. More studies are needed to capture how it is used for both expressive (social) and instrumental functions. It is particularly important to interview immigrants themselves and hear their stories about how ICTs act as either barriers or opportunities, or both, in increasing inclusion and settlement. An example of a neighborhood ethnography of Internet usage was conducted by the Everyday Internet project (Viseu, Clement, & Aspinall, 2004) but the emphasis was not on immigrants per se, although data were collected about them in the course of the study.

Within the ICT literature, more research is needed on the relationship between Internet-based information practices and concepts such as social capital. For example, studies that examine employment-seeking practices using the Internet (Jansen & Spink, 2005; McQuaid, Lindsay, & Greig, 2004) indicate that, although Web-based job searching can be fruitful, it is important to recognize the overriding importance of local social networks for employment information sharing and referrals (McQuaid, et al., 2004).

**Research on Transnationalism**

There are also many gaps to be filled in our understanding of the relationship between transnationalism and information practices, although research in this area
is increasing. Research might examine how new immigrants, for instance, make use of their transnational network ties (individuals living outside of the host country and with whom they have contact) when seeking settlement information (e.g., employment, housing, citizenship information). Drawing upon the notion of social capital, one can explore how local and transnational network ties constrain and/or provide access to information resources. It would be useful to trace how local and transnational networks are mobilized by individuals, as well as the motivations individuals identify as they seek information through a variety of formats and pathways.

**Interdisciplinary Research**

Another fruitful area of study would be to analyze systematically the means by which different bodies of literature approach and comprehend settlement or immigration “needs.” What is brought into focus and what is obscured in each strand of literature (e.g., library and information studies, communication studies, community-based research, social work, immigrant studies) reveals telling differences about how the immigration process is understood by policymakers, service providers, researchers, and the immigrants themselves. Juxtaposing the research results could result in a dialogue among the various stakeholders and elicit rich findings about the assumptions made and the gaps between discourse and practice, between imagined lives and real needs. Finally, more research is needed on the most effective ways of engaging immigrant communities in disseminating knowledge about themselves.

**Information Environments**

The notion of information environments is increasingly being used to describe the particular everyday life context in which immigrants find themselves upon arrival in the host country. For example, Mehra and Papajohn (2007, p. 13) use the term “culturally alien information environment” and Srinivasan and Pyati (2007, p. 1739) refer to the “diasporic information environment.” Information environments have a profound effect on the daily information practices employed by immigrants. There are several other areas where the information environments of immigrants can be explored more fully. For example, what impact do immigration policies/practices by the state and/or community have on the trajectory of immigrants (e.g., integration or inclusion models)? How does the current politically charged post-9/11 environment (with its emphasis on national security) shape the discourse around multiculturalism and immigration?

As we mentioned at the beginning, this literature review is by no means exhaustive. Instead, this chapter’s intent is to map out the general terrain that represents the information practices of immigrants. Its aim is to offer a snapshot of the current landscape and suggest areas for potential research with a view to generating new insights and contributions as well as the development of conceptual frameworks that can further our understanding of the vital issues in this interdisciplinary area of research.
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Endnote

1. Significant portions of the text in this section were adapted from an unpublished report: Information Practices of Immigrants (by Nadia Caidi, Danielle Allard, & Diane Dechief, 2008) for Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

References


