Annotated Bibliography on Information Poverty, Concentrating on the Work of Elfreda Chatman


If any one article was being targeted in the two critiques of the very concept of information written by Haider and Bawden (see below), it would be this one, which stakes a specifically “social justice” claim to the necessity of leveling the playing field for the information poor. This article specifically engages morality, ethics, the responsibilities of the developed world towards the developing world, the have-towards the have-nots, etc. An earlier article I encountered clearly led up to this one.


Who can’t be charmed by this peculiar pairing of virtual communities and feminist booksellers? Another article that affirms the small world view of information behavior, whereby group norms govern behavior, this article delves into the brave new world of the Internet, coming to the conclusion that virtual communities share characteristics with geographically based communities, a finding that’s definitely been confirmed again and again since then. A completely separate study looks at the “small world” of the owners of feminist bookstores, a community which, like virtual communities, isn’t geographically based, but spread across the nation. If one expected that the small world of these booksellers might exhibit the closed-mindedness of more informational impoverished small worlds, those expectations aren’t fulfilled, as these women are on the contrary quite informational rich, and promoting of said richness. Not one of Chatman’s most “seminal” articles, and, for that reason, perhaps, it’s not hard to like, and there isn’t much in it that one is inclined to take issue with.


This rather odd article, co-authored by Thompson, Chatman’s contemporary champion, and one of Chatman’s collaborators, begins by positing three types of impediments to information access—those
being physical (in terms of the physical forms of information, including digital), intellectual (focusing on individual characteristics), and social (as per small world theory). It then documents three instances where “small worlds” supposedly come into contact with each other regarding their notions of information and access to it. In the first, old and new notions of what constitutes “a library” clash over San Francisco’s new digitally-equipped public library. In the second, a librarian imbued with ALA freedom of information values is fired by public officials in her tiny Oklahoma town in 1951. In the third, George W. Bush’s administration is taken to task for unilaterally taking all kinds of formerly public information out of circulation. Interesting cases all, but this scarcely seems like Elfreda Chatman’s ideas concerning small worlds.


Chatman worked primarily with four different female populations—African-American university janitors, African-American CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) temporary government workers, middle-class white retirees, and prisoners. Each group may turn up in more than one article, and the CETA workers investigated here figure into her research involving diffusion theory, too. Here, the main finding is that at least this population of women did not conform to pre-existing studies that characterized the poor as utilizing mass media for overwhelmingly “entertainment” purposes. These women read the newspaper, and watch local television news, primarily for very local information, regarding where crimes have occurred, what neighborhoods to avoid, etc.


The subjects are CETA workers, temporary employees of the government, who got their jobs because they “qualified,” which meant that, according to the government’s criterion, they were the ones who were in most desperate need for these jobs (they’re all mothers with families). Diffusion theory, taken from the social sciences, applies to the diffusion of innovations, but Chatman adapts it to the diffusion of information, and tests the theory here. The only problem is that there’s a tremendous, study aborting (to my mind at least) idiosyncrasy implicit in what she’s studying. She seeks to see if job information diffuses from worker to worker, yet these workers naturally keep said job information to themselves, so as to maximize the likelihood that they themselves might get the job that they’ve learned
about. That’s human nature for sure, but hardly an ordinary situation when it comes to sharing information. Nonetheless, down the line Ms. Chatman derives at least one postulate of her theory of information poverty from this “glitch.”


One of Chatman’s seminal articles, which draws upon existing theory, from the social sciences, and which concentrates upon the same population of female janitors at LSU, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that figures into her complimentary article about gratification theory. Chatman finds evidence within her study group of four of the five characteristics of alienation articulated by the theory: powerlessness (in relation to their work-life), meaninglessness (in relation to their work), isolation (in relation to their co-workers, AND their neighbors at home), and self-estrangement (in relation to their work, the “classic” meaning of alienation. She doesn’t find confirmation, however, of normlessness. In fact the janitors are surprisingly conformist in their normalcy regarding social mores, and, while they’re critical of the behavior of other janitors (who goof off at work), they hold themselves to higher standards.


For my money, the most resonant Chatman article, and the most applicable to other populations. Her six articulated postulates here stand up a lot better, for me anyway, than her other theoretical “pillars.” Proposition II concerns low expectations, and a belief that, if something happens to work out, it’s on account of luck, and not effort or planning. I can relate to this one in my own life, and if one thing is certain, if you don’t believe that anything will ever work out, it will not, because you don’t make the effort that might culminate in something good actually happening! Gratification theory is more or less about “instant gratification.” That the poor, that the information poor, don’t plan for the future (because they don’t believe that anything will result from planning or effort), and so live “for the moment.”


This is Chatman’s book-length study of the information behaviors of retired women in a southern facility for “independent living.” And therein lies the catch—you can only live there so long as you
don’t need assistance. Ergo, the women conceal from the staff, and, from one another, their true state of health, and, their true need for information. (They don’t share such information with one another, even, not only because they’re afraid that someone might “snitch,” but because if other women learn that you need help, they’ll shun you, so as not to find themselves in a position where you become more and more “dependent” upon them. Women go so far as to fall down in their apartments and then just lie there until they’re sufficiently recovered to be able to get up again—i.e., they don’t signal for help. While the book is full of evidence that the women in many ways share a great deal of information with one another, it’s this peculiar “glitch” in the situation she’s studying that seems to cause her to postulate, in her information poverty theory, that the information poor deceive and conceal, in order to protect themselves. These women did, for good reason, but that reason doesn’t exist in the larger world, certainly not the same way. The book’s rich in detail, but I’d say mostly anthropological detail. It’s easy to forget when reading it that it’s supposed to be about information behavior! Or it was for me, anyway.


This is the article in which Chatman synthesizes work done in her various previous studies with her various female populations, and posits her theory of information poverty, with its six propositions, that at least for me don’t seem to hold up very well, on any kind of macro-basis. These are 1. That the information poor perceive themselves to be such. 2. That some sort of “upper class” outsiders do withhold information, aggravating matters. 3. That self-protective behaviors determine information poverty. 4. That self-protective secrecy and deception result from distrust of information offered by outsiders. 5. That one’s true problems aren’t exposed so as not to risk negative consequences outweighing benefits. And. 6. That new knowledge does work its way into the information world of poor people, but very slowly, and only if its relevant. Several of these propositions seem to me to derive directly from the very idiosyncratic circumstances surrounding at least two of her studies (I won’t say which here), and are anything but universal!


Here, near the end of her truncated career, Chatman examines the information behaviors of a category of the information poor who more or less remain information poor, in some areas, altogether on
purpose. Information from the “outside world” only tends to depress prisoners—i.e. being reminded that their children are growing up in their absence. So little outside information is sought, and instead all focus is turned inward, inward I mean in the sense of inward towards the prison, or “behind bars.” A terrific annoyance for me however is that the phrase “life in the round,” far as I can tell, is never explained! Does she “take it for granted” that we know what it means? “It is a ‘taken-for-granted,’ ‘business-as-usual’ style of being.” And that’s in the abstract! Once again it seems to me that whatever conclusions she might draw from this situation, they’re not very likely to be universally applicable. Chatman is such an anthropologist, one wonders whether she secretly didn’t feel like she’d gotten her PhD in the wrong field, but was determined not to be thwarted from her true interests, by bending them towards her degree.


This article seems to me to demonstrate Chatman’s proclivity towards making blanket assertions that undercut her seeming determination to be rigorously scientific. Citing Cohen and Hodges, and Black, it’s asserted that “social exchanges among poor people are ones astonishing [sic] devoid of support or caring.” Then citing who knows who, she goes on to assert that “the overwhelming evidence is that poor people have a minimal association with neighbors.” I don’t know, but these seem like nearly lunatic overstatements to me.

Creelman, J. A. E. & Harris, R. M. Coming out: the information needs of lesbians. *Collection Building, 10*, 37-41.

From a social justice standpoint, lesbians are a classic under-served community, who as citizens are entitled to being “represented” in the collections of public libraries. Also, the phenomenon of “coming out,” including coming to terms, within oneself, of one’s “difference,” is an information behavior researcher’s dream come true. While fledgling lesbians might start out as “information poor” regarding the implications and mores of being a gay woman, they don’t remain poor long, by and large, thanks to the gay community (and, hopefully, to sensitive collection development specialists.) I’m citing this article here, also, because it compliments another article on the information needs of gay men who are also coming out, which more directly addresses Chatman’s conception of information poverty.

Although most of Ms. Chatman’s articles end with a concluding several paragraphs regarding what information professionals might do to assimilate lessons learned from the preceding research, this article more than most is specifically “pitched” at said information professionals. Reference group theory is pretty straightforward insofar as one’s “reference group” is the group towards whom one orients oneself, in terms of appropriate behavior (including information behavior.) While its true that if one’s group spurns information seeking of a library-type, that one thereupon spurns library information seeking, there’s a loophole which allows for people to move from group to group, using transitory groups as “stepping-stones” towards upward mobility. And if someone’s aspiring upwards, they might actually seek information, and might use the library!


This article preceded the article described immediately below. If this second article critiques the discourse of information poverty, this initial article locates that discourse in the earlier discourse of development, and critiques that discourse of development, too! It traces the conceptualization of “the developing world” starting with Harry S. Truman at the end of World War II, and segues into information poverty discourse (as per Foucault) from there. As with the second article, my impression that it was ideologically rightwing gave way to a faint understanding that its critique of “development discourse” didn’t constitute an antipathy towards genuine development, itself, but rather indicated a critical orientation towards developed world “development professionals,” whose livelihoods and self-images are tied-up in there being an under-developed world, and under-developed peoples, to develop!


This article is a well-argued critique of the very idea of information poverty, so much so that the phrase information poverty, in the title, enclosed by quotation marks! Using Foucault’s ideas concerning discourse, which approximately boil down to, “if people in privileged positions say that something is so often enough, then, it is so, or at least, it seems to be so,” the authors allege that information poverty discourse tends to be imbued with a very un-academic missionary zeal, whereby what the developing
world “needs” is precisely what the developed world’s information specialists have to give them. This critique would seem “rightwing,” but for its obvious sensitivity to the peoples who information poverty “saviors” tend to define as the information poor.


This very interesting article, while seeming to affirm several of the tenants of Elfreda Chapman’s theory of information poverty, ultimately, at least by my reading, presents evidence that refutes them. While it’s absolutely true that a gay adolescent, only beginning to come to terms with his sexuality, tends to be tentative, and secretive, for fear of alienating friends, and family members, the article presents evidence of young men who very deliberately, and very forcefully, pursue their information needs, and empower themselves, by informing themselves. Of course gay adolescents find support within the already come-out adult gay community, and quickly “de-alienate” themselves within that community, and (to my mind) are almost the opposite of the information poor as characterized by Chatman, who are alienated and isolated.


One of many examples of an article pitched at talking about “the digital divide,” predicated on unequal access to ITCs, as opposed to articles about information poverty. The often pointed out distinction is made that digital divides exist both between people within the same geographic or political area (i.e. nation), and between nations (i.e. between developed and developing nations). Information Literacy is mentioned as something being lacking amongst those who find themselves on the “wrong” side of the divide—another implicit suggestion that information poverty might be conceived of as the opposite of information literacy.


A very interesting article in so far as it applies Elfreda Chatman’s theories and methods to a housing project in the UK. From what I know of the British social welfare state, much of this consists of interactions between chronically underemployed working class people “on the dole,” and a professional
class of government social workers. This dichotomy is clear in this article, wherein poor residents of public housing express a willingness to accept information from the “helping profession,” if said helping profession doesn’t act condescending and “upper-class” in their transactions, such that the information that they give might actually begin to be trusted.


This very interesting article questions the utility of access to the Internet by studying homeless families in three cities of the US. It finds that most needed information, concerning available housing, jobs, medical care, and the like, are obtained locally, both through social service professionals, and friends, family and fellow shelter residents. Face to face information sharing is overwhelmingly favored, and several of Elfreda Chapman’s characterizations of the information poor, particularly those involving secrecy and deception, are strongly refuted by her data.


Here, Chatman teams up with a Finnish scholar, and said scholar’s research at a Finnish university, to apply her small world theories and ideas regarding “social capital” to an analysis of how well (or how poorly) the various stratum of a university share information with one another. (They do so fairly well, it turns out, with much dialogue occurring even between widely separated levels of the hierarchy. You’ve got to hand it to those Finns.) The lingo of private-sector special librarianship is utilized here, with knowledge creation and value added and even “value constellation” concepts going through their paces. An interesting distinction is made between one-way and two-way transfers of information. Only the two-way transfer really constitutes sharing. Obvious, perhaps, but interesting nonetheless.

A brief survey (originally a symposium presentation) of the principles that would ideally guide the implementation of e-government in nations around the world, an obvious extrapolation from the work that these two authors have done, together and separately, concerning e-government in the US.


Kim Thompson seems to be perhaps the most visible successor to the work of information poverty researcher/theorist Elfreda Chatman. She and her co-author here address the phenomenon of the under or non-utilization of e-government information by large sections of the population, and apply Chatman’s theories of information poverty, and normative behavior, by way of possible explanation. Normative behavior theory, derived from sociology, posits that people in any given “small world” tend to make their behavior, including their information behavior (i.e. what is considered information worth pursuing and heeding, and what isn’t), conform to the group they belong to.


Here is another article that’s pitched specifically at librarians/information professionals, which seeks to explain Chatman’s work to librarians. If a major finding of Chatman’s work is that the information poor, sticking to their “small worlds,” have no use for libraries, the suggestion to librarians in this paper is that they begin to consider what the actual information needs and behaviors of these “non-users” (the traditional means of labeling, and dismissing, those who don’t use libraries) actually are, and to consider how the library might change its ways, to address those information needs and behaviors.

I cite this here because Kim Thompson cites it in her dissertation. She accessed it however via a link that’s now defunct. I ran into it before looking at her dissertation simply by putting “information poverty” into google. What’s remarkable about this “article” is that, while it exists on an individual’s individual (self-dedicated) website, and therefore is anything but “peer-reviewed,” published in a “reputable” journal, etc., it’s very nearly as cogent an overview of Chatman’s work, and of information poverty itself, as I’ve come across. This brings to mind Foucault’s notions of a discourse becoming entrenched thanks to being shored up institutionally. I wonder how it is that Ms. Thompson came across the work, but she, far more of an authority on this subject than I can claim to be, evidently found it to be quite sensible, too. However I think that she might have mistook a subject heading for the name of a periodical, so perhaps she was “deceived.”


This fascinating article goes into considerable detail regarding the challenges of presenting information regarding the advisability of female Pacific Island immigrants to New Zealand getting annual pap smears, given the fact that they are at high risk for contracting cervical cancer. Evidently from a “modest” culture, where families don’t discuss sexuality, there’s a misperception that cervical cancer is linked to premarital sex. What is more, while Pacific Island women are most comfortable receiving such information from Pacific Island churchgoers (“the bishop’s wife” being the stereotypical yet evidently real religious “authority,” they emphatically don’t want Pacific Island women performing the actual smears, for fear that their “business” will be leaked into their community. The article ends with a resounding refutation of Chatman’s characterization of the information poor as being intensely isolated and alienated from their neighbors. If Ms. Chatman thought that she was positing universal laws of information poverty, as time passes it seems clear that several of her postulates were not only quite bound to the United States, but quite possibly bound to a population not much larger than the specific populations that she studied (i.e. a group of female janitors at LSU in Baton Rouge, Louisiana). Kim Thompson writes extensively of this article’s contrary findings in her dissertation.

This is Kim Thomson’s thesis, and a very cogent overview of the several aspects of information poverty. Thompson is an acolyte of Elfreda Chatman (to whom the dissertation is dedicated), but Chatman’s small world theory constitutes but one third of her “explanations” for information poverty, the first one being economic, the second one being social, which concerns social theories regarding the mores of the poor, formulated before and independent from the theories of Elfreda Chatman, or Information Behavior as its own defined discipline, even. I found these “social” (i.e. sociological) “reasons” very interesting indeed. She also interestingly equates the economic reasons with the political left (attributing information poverty to injustices inherent in the “system”), and the “social” reasons with the political right (it’s the poor’s own fault), although both factors surely count, and aren’t inherently ideological. This deep, three-level “multidisciplinary” approach to information poverty is very appealing to me, and is suggestive of the approach of L. Yu’s “Understanding information inequality: making sense of the literature of the information and digital divides” (see below).


Unlike any article I’ve encountered, this article posits that information poverty can be conceptualized as the antithesis of information literacy, a condition towards which academic librarians strive, on behalf of their clients, and write a great deal. Harkening back to a seminal article that early on defined information poverty in 1975, Thompson points to three main components of information poverty—an incapacity to process information, social/cultural factors (as per Chatman’s small world theory), and an overall sense of hopefulness that disallows meaningful information acquisition because the search is perceived as being ultimately futile.


Still another interesting article by Kim Thompson that makes the case that since its founding, the United States has advocated the free flow of information for all, as a means of better establishing some approximation of an “equal playing field.” As with other Thompson articles, the U.S. government is
implicitly applauded for at least theoretically making itself digitally accessible to its citizens, while being cognizant that myriad barriers still exist that might inhibit said citizens from maximally accessing it.


The title describes this article, as well as the esteem that Ms. Thomson has for Ms. Chatman’s work. What’s emphasized here is Chatman’s willingness and inclination to draw upon existing theory from the social sciences, and to test it by applying it to information behavior, and her research into information poverty. Diffusion, opinion leadership, alienation and gratification theories were all drawn upon, and Ms. Thompson chooses to enumerate the six postulates that Chatman postulated in her research regarding gratification theory, an emphasis I agree with, as those six postulates hold up much better I believe than her propositions regarding information poverty, itself, as enumerated in her article, *The Impoverished Life-World of Outsiders*. Chatman, it seems to me, overreached herself when she ventured into articulating theories of her own, but on the other hand, her desire that her work, that everyone’s work, be grounded in thoughtful theory, certainly makes sense.


This article I assumed would be another “same old, same old,” but, was anything but. Written by a Chinese scholar, whose PhD was earned in the UK, the article synthesizes conceptions of information poverty, and “the digital divide,” perhaps better than any other. She characterizes information poverty discourse as being largely ethically driven (with a social justice perspective), and divided into three streams—one which emphasizes political economy, another “small world” communities (socially-constructed), and another “cognitive,” based upon each individual’s characteristics. Whereas digital divide discourse is characterized as being permeated with political ideologies, whether that of George Bush, or leftwing opposites. Digital divide discourse concentrates upon technology and infrastructure, and tends to favor, and to be favored by, private enterprise.