Chapter 2
Informed Democracy:
Information Experiences during the 2012 Queensland Election

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the preliminary findings of a qualitative study exploring people's information experiences during the 2012 Queensland State election in Australia. Six residents of South East Queensland who were eligible to vote in the state election participated in a semi-structured interview. The interviews revealed five themes that depict participants' information experience during the election: information sources, information flow, personal politics, party politics, and sense making. Together these themes represent what is experienced as information, how information is experienced, as well as contextual aspects that were unique to voting in an election. The study outlined here is one in an emerging area of enquiry that has explored information experience as a research object. This study has revealed that people's information experiences are rich, complex, and dynamic, and that information experience as a construct of scholarly inquiry provides deep insights into the ways in which people relate to their information worlds. More studies exploring information experience within different contexts are needed to help develop our theoretical understanding of this important and emerging construct.

INTRODUCTION

Enrolling to vote and voting is compulsory for every Australian citizen over 18 years. In March 2013, 91.2% of eligible Australians were enrolled to vote (Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), 2013). Since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924, the turnout at Australian elections has never fallen below 90% (Evans, 2006). The AEC (n.d., p. 2) notes that "citizens have the right and the responsibility to enrol and vote" because "voting in elections is a powerful way for citizens to have a say in the decision-making which affects their lives." Whilst a body of literature has begun to explore people's voting activities from the perspective of communication studies (Chen, 2008), human information behavior (Moody, 2011), psychology (Kam & Utych, 2011) and new media (Burns & Burgess, 2010), very little research has investigated this event from the perspective of people's information experience. Information experience has recently become a construct of interest within library and information research (Bruce, Partridge, Hughes, & Davis, in press). Studies exploring information experience direct attention to aspects such as what is experienced as information, how information is experienced, the outcome of the information experience, and the broader context in which the experience occurs. Information experience research allows a broad understanding and interpretation of people's engagement and interaction with their information environment (Bruce & Partridge, 2011). The focus on experience takes into account the interrelations between people and their broader environments in a manner which considers people and their world as inseparable. The research presented in this chapter fills this gap by investigating people's information experiences during the 2012 Queensland state election. The chapter first provides the background to the study, by introducing existing literature that has explored how people engage with information as part of voting activities. Next the chapter outlines the current study, providing details of the method, the participants, data collection and analysis as well as presenting the study's findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the research outcomes relate to current literature, the study's practical and theoretical implications, and suggests some possible directions for future research.

BACKGROUND

It has been argued that without a basic understanding of differences in policy between candidates and parties "the public will be unable to cast its ballots wisely and, hence, unable to hold elected leaders accountable for their actions" (Craig, Kane, & Gainous, 2005, p. 483). Eveland, Hayes, Shah, and Kwak (2005, p. 428) echo this sentiment stating that "knowledge of such information is important for citizens to make informed decisions." How then do voters select, gather and use political information that is available to them? There has been a plethora of research in the political arena, giving some insight into the information sources used by citizens to inform their voting decisions, and factors that affect certain aspects of voting such as perceived knowledge, political self efficacy and commitment to vote. This section will briefly review some of the findings of research that has been undertaken in this field.

Much has been uncovered about the sources that citizens report using to gather information to inform their vote. For example, Lusoli (2005) reported that 78% of Europeans surveyed reported receiving election information from television or radio broadcasts, 60% read newspaper articles, and 46% discussed political issues with family and friends. Norris and Curtice (2007) found similar results for British citizens: 51% used television or radio broadcasts for their political information gathering, 47% read the newspaper, and 46% discussed the election with friends and family. While conducting focus group interviews with college students in the United States, Wells and

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