

## **Information Behavior of Journalists: Analysis of Critical Incidents of Information Finding and Use**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study is aimed at investigating information behavior of journalists in Kuwait. It attempted to seek answers to questions such how search for information is initiated, what information sources are preferred and how successful is information finding activity? Journalists were asked to report critical incidences of information finding related to their recent journalistic assignment through a questionnaire. Analysis of 42 critical incidents indicated that journalistic assignments were in four major areas: political, cultural business, and sports. In most cases, background information was most frequently sought type of information. Internet was the most frequently used information source even though some journalists perceived that information available on the various web sites may not be very objective. A follow up study is planned to be carried out to discuss the findings with a selected group of journalists using focus group discussions.

**Keywords:** Information behavior, Kuwait; Information needs, Kuwait; Information seeking, Kuwait; Journalists; Critical incident method

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) refers to a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in different areas of activities. A critical incident makes significant contribution to an activity or phenomenon. Critical incidents can be gathered in various ways by asking respondents to tell a story about an experience they have had. CIT offers a rigorous tool for achieving a deep understanding of the information-seeking behavior of a particular group of users. Unlike the traditional surveys, CIT provides an opportunity to probe beneath the surface of a situation and to provide a rich context for understanding the information behavior of professionals and managers. Analysis of critical incidents of finding and using information helps investigate motivation behind decisions to seek information; selection of sources of information and steps in identification, assessment, and use of information. Context-specific data collected through CIT can help develop an in-depth understanding of information behavior for suggesting steps for improving information services in a meaningful manner.

Various researchers have suggested that critical incident technique explores a brief but memorable information seeking episode (Urquhart, 2001). A couple of studies have used this technique to investigate information behavior of professional groups. For example, Fidel and Green (2004) employed a variant of the critical incident technique where engineers recalled a recent instance of information seeking which was used to investigate individual cases of information seeking. Daft, Lengel, and Trevino (1987) employed the critical Success Factor technique to identify over 200 incidents of actual work performed by managers and to compile a list of media typically used by managers.

We could not locate any study where critical incident techniques were used to investigate information seeking of journalists. We were convinced that the peculiarities of journalistic work make critical incident techniques attractive for information behavior research. We decided to use critical incident technique for investigating information behavior of journalist in Kuwait. We expect that analysis of critical incidents of journalists will provide important clues to come up with specific recommendations for improvement focusing on accessibility and usability issues. In the second phase of our project, we will have follow-up discussions with a group of journalists to be selected from those who provided critical incidents. Analysis of critical incidents of information finding was considered better than traditional questionnaire surveys as it was expected to report information searching in a natural way.

### ***Peculiarities of Information Needs of Journalists***

Information seeking by journalists is motivated by originality checking that requires use of multiple sources and spaces. Journalistic work generally involves uncertain context sometimes requiring reinitiating earlier information; finding activities including the relocation and review of previously consulted sources.

Campbell (1997) pointed out that journalists are unique in the ways in which they search for information. Unlike other professionals, journalists seem to use the easiest way of finding information. It is due to the nature of the news process. The method by which the journalists construct news precludes the reporter from spending an elaborate amount of time evaluating the best possible sources of information. It has been reported that journalists use tacit or taken-for-granted rules to evaluate issues to gather information and to construct the news. The ways in which journalists search for information and the sources that they consult are critical to the understanding of the communication process which facilitates the mediation of complex issues to the readership or audience.

Attfield and Dowell (2003) highlighted that nature of work of journalists requires them to use wide and varied sources of information. Some sources are unique to journalism, e.g., conversations, phone-ins, and daily news diaries. Emphasis is on human sources as journalists are encouraged to gather information by talking to people, e.g., victims, officials, experts, etc. This is partly due to the fact that time is limited in news-construction and human sources give comments or explain complex issues in simple terminology. The pragmatic factors in journalist work require journalists use each other's contacts for information. It is also important to them that they validate assertions and check facts of issues. All this has to be accomplished within a set time and a set amount of space. Information finding strategies therefore have to be straight forward and executed quickly targeting a range of sources.

Poteet (2000) pointed out that the information environment of journalists is changing rapidly as the influence of information technology changes the way people communicate and share data. The range of technologies has expanded enormously. Journalists are using electronic archives of the newspaper to commercial online databases and web sites with downloadable text, data, images and audio. More and more newspaper journalists are gaining desktop access to online information sources that were not available to them just a few years ago.

Peculiarities of journalist work prompted us to conduct a study of information seeking of scientists focusing on the actual information finding activities by using critical incident techniques.

### ***Previous Studies***

We could not locate any study of information seeking among journalists that used critical incident technique. However, we noticed that peculiarities of information needs of journalists were addressed in several studies that used different methods for collecting relevant data. These studies are briefly summarized in this section.

Poteet (2000) conducted a questionnaire survey of newspaper journalists at the Charlotte Observer and the News & Observer of Raleigh to gather data regarding use of online information sources. This study found that journalists frequently use online information sources. A majority believes that online sources are very important to information gathering in their work. More than 80 percent use email and the web sites daily, although less than half search internal sources weekly.

Attfield and Dowell (2003) studied information seeking and use by newspaper journalists using interviews. They found their information seeking behavior was motivated by originality checking, personal understanding, and developing and determining potential context. The study concluded that information gathering is motivated by context and facilitated by available resources. They highlighted that journalists' work is uncertain. They have to re-initiate preparatory information seeking activities including the relocation and review of previously read documents.

Anwar, Ansari, and Abdullah (2004) investigated the information seeking behavior of working journalists in Kuwait. The 92 respondents to a questionnaire were mostly male. Results showed that they placed emphasis on fact-checking and background information. They obtained

information by using a wide variety of informal and formal sources. Human sources, Internet, and press releases were considered high in terms of importance and satisfaction. Use of in-house electronic library of stories was very limited. Respondents considered their information searching skills very important for their work and were willing to go through information literacy training. They thought that lack of time was their top ranking problem.

Anwar and Asghar (2004) investigated the information seeking behavior of print journalists in Pakistan using a self-administered questionnaire. They noted that journalists placed emphasis on fact checking and general information. Information was obtained by using a wide variety of informal and formal sources. They preferred human sources and also made use of personal collections, daily news diaries, and news agency reports. The Internet and the in-house electronic library of stories were found limited both in availability and use. The lack of information searching skills was found to be a problem. Journalists consider these very important for their work and are willing to go through training if it were provided to them.

Abdullah (2006) investigated the internet related information seeking behavior of journalists in Kuwait. A self-administered questionnaire and follow-up email interviews were used to collect data from three perspectives: access and internet usage, evaluation and purpose, and information technology skills. Access and usage were related to obstacles preventing Internet use. Results showed that print journalists in Kuwait were lacking efficient information behaviors in relations to the Internet and information technology. Their usage of Internet was limited to the most popular applications such as E-mail, search engines, and the World Wide Web. The study concluded that improved behaviors for journalists in Kuwait require interventions on three fronts: education and curricula, training, and workplace practices. These interventions can pave the way for an efficient journalism industry in Kuwait which utilizes the Internet and information technology to its benefit.

Ansari and Zuberi (2010) investigated the use of various information channels and ways used for disseminating information and use among media professionals in Karachi. A questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection for the survey. Data was gathered from 185 media professionals through a questionnaire survey. Findings indicate that library is the most used channel among newspaper professionals and television professionals. Media professionals get to know of the information sources through common knowledge and review articles. Internet is the channel, which is being used increasingly by media practitioners. The use of libraries among radio practitioners was found to be particularly low. All groups of the practitioners mentioned reading of book reviews published in newspapers to know the existence of an information source. This study would be helpful for librarians and information specialists, who are working in media house libraries for library planning and designing of library services in their parent organization.

### ***Procedures of Data Collection on Critical Incidents***

The first phase of our project focused on gathering critical incidents related to finding and using information from journalists working for leading newspapers in Kuwait. We collected 42 critical incidents from working journalists from five Kuwaiti newspapers. A simple questionnaire was used to help elicit information from journalists about their latest critical incident about information finding. The journalists were asked to describe the latest incident when they needed to find information for a work related assignment.

Simple questions provided a sort of template suggesting possible sequential steps (milestones) for finding and discovering information. For example, they were asked when was the last time they needed information; what type of information was needed; how did they start looking for information; what channels and sources (human, electronic, documentary, etc.) did they use; where eventually they found needed information; and what difficulties were encountered in finding the information. They were then requested to provide feedback if the information they collected was actually used in performing a specific task. The objective was to find out if they thought of looking through relevant sources of information; whether they were able to figure out that there were services and sources available in or through their own organizations that they could have used.

The first phase is exploratory in nature and provides base lines data relating to information needs of journalists. Focus group discussions will be used in the second phase that is expected to yield in qualitative data.

## FINDINGS

A total of 42 journalists provided information about their last critical incident for finding information related to their journalistic assignments. These journalists are working for five different newspapers: Kuwait Times, Arab Times, Al-Anba'a, Al-Rai Al-am, and Al-Seyassa. A majority (31) of these journalists hold a Bachelor's degree and only a small number (3) hold Master's degree. Three journalists just have high school qualification and 2 hold a diploma. Majority of these journalists (31) have more than six years of work experience. Only a small proportion of these journalists have less than five years experience. Majority of the journalists who provided critical incident data are male. There are only six female journalists who responded to our request. A majority (30) of journalists who participated in our study are in the age range of 21-40. A majority of these journalists (29) are news editors, six hold the title of reporters and another six hold the position of economy editor. The areas of specialization and the functions of editors include the following:

- Current affairs 17
- Business 12
- Local affairs 7
- Sports 5
- Education 5
- Religion & politics 3

Majority of the journalists (22) who reported the information finding critical incidents are members of the Kuwait Journalists Association; six belong to newsgroups and discussion forums; and four participate in relevant communities of interest/practice. Interestingly, only two journalists sought assistance in information finding from the professional groups that they belong to. The journalists who participated in our study use social media and collaboration tools on regular basis. The tools that they reported they were using frequently are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Electronic Tools Frequently Used**

Information Services	# of journalists
E-mails	17
Mobile phone	11
Social media (Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, etc.)	2
One-to-one talk	2
Social software (Blogs, Wikis, etc.)	1

The journalists were requested to describe briefly their last journalistic assignment (a work related event) elaborating on the kind of activity. The reported incidents were categorized based on the nature of assignment. These are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Critical Incidents**

Category	Critical Incidents
Cultural	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Skills exhibition coverage for Kuwaiti youth</li> <li>2. Committing suicide</li> <li>3. The current situation in the Arab world</li> <li>4. Press conference about civil aviation</li> <li>5. Media Seminar</li> <li>6. Coverage of a social event</li> <li>7. Covering an event in Kuwait university</li> <li>8. Recruitment of secretary for the national council for culture</li> <li>9. Spotting the light on the corruption in ministry of health</li> <li>10. The launch of a campaign "This is Kuwait"</li> <li>11. Interviewing a key person in human rights council</li> <li>12. Environmental issues in the Arabian Gulf peninsula</li> <li>13. Skills exhibition coverage for Kuwaiti youth</li> </ol>
Political	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Release from prison event coverage for Dr. Al-Wasmy</li> <li>2. Resignation of Egypt president (i.e. Hosni Mubarak)</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Departure of Egyptian teachers because of the current events in Egypt</li> <li>4. Political seminar coverage</li> <li>5. Citizens crowding outside the parliament – protest against the prime minister</li> <li>6. Coverage of a political event in Kuwait</li> <li>7. Political current situations in Egypt on Kuwaiti stock market</li> <li>8. The Egyptian protest</li> <li>9. Egyptians demonstrating against their president</li> <li>10. Parliament reporting</li> <li>11. Opposing calling for resignation of the prime minister</li> <li>12. Current protests in the region are influencing the political situation</li> <li>13. Situation in Bahrain and Egypt</li> </ol>
Business	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Resignation of the society of accountants' board of directors</li> <li>2. Coverage of releasing a new car in Denmark &amp; Sweden</li> <li>3. Business conference</li> <li>4. Money laundering case</li> <li>5. Real state conference coverage</li> <li>6. Investigating about key persons in business</li> <li>7. Coverage of a business project</li> <li>8. Interviewing key personnel in Zain Telecommunication</li> <li>9. Political current situations in Egypt on Kuwaiti stock market</li> </ol>
Sports	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. AFC Asian Cup</li> <li>2. International shooting camp</li> <li>3. Coverage of a sports feature</li> <li>4. Story about sports</li> <li>5. Football championship</li> </ol>

Incidents reported fall in four categories including political, social, business, and sports. Most journalistic activities appeared to have happened in the area of politics or current affairs.

Journalists reported the type of information they needed to carry out the assignments reported in their critical incidents. The types of information are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Type of Information Required**

Type of Information required	Respondents
Background information	22
Statistics	14
Detailed analysis	13
Articles	7
Videos	6
Features	3
Photographs	2
Critical interviews	1

Critical incidents reported by journalists indicated that the most important type of information for them was background information needed to develop stories, write features, and construct news.

Information sources where journalists found information about their journalistic assignment is given in Table 4.

**Table 4: Sources Where Information Was Found**

Information Sources	# of cases
Internet	32
- Newspaper websites (19)	
- Google. (11)	
- AFC website (1)	
- KSSF/ISSF website (1)	

Personal documents (Archives)	20
Library/information centers - Newspaper library (8) - Newspaper information center (1)	9
Others - News channels. Al-Jazeera & Al-Arabbiya (2) - Statistical information from relevant ministry (1) - Social Websites; Facebook (1) - Personal interview (1)	5

Analysis of information sources indicated that Internet was considered the most useful information source. Perceptions of journalists about the usefulness of sources are given in Table 5.

**Table 5: More Useful Information Sources**

Information resources	# of cases
Internet websites	17
Colleagues	3
Personal documents (archives)	3
Library/ information centers	1
Social network (Facebook)	1
Personal interview	1
Kuwait shooting federation	1

Some journalists pointed out that they were not very satisfied with the accuracy of the information. They thought that information collected from web sites might not be objective.

We also asked the journalists about how they would assess the quality of information found on different criteria. Their input is given in Table 6.

**Table 6: Assessment of Information Sources**

Parameters	Average Score
Quality	3.97
Accessibility	3.64
Currency	3.52
Ease of use	3.42
Familiarity with the source	3.21

Journalists assessed the information sources on five parameters on a scale of 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest). Average scores shown in Table 6 indicate that they give more importance to quality of information and accessibility.

It was reassuring to see comments from journalist that they were quite comfortable in searching and finding information. One journalist reported 'I don't face any difficulty, because I make sure to search in the right place using the right tool'. The journalists also found to be aware of the limitations of the information from the Internet. One journalist reported 'Information on the web is not objective at all. It would be better if there is a website where I retrieve information from that is accurate, and 100% objective.' Some journalists were concerned about the restrictions imposed by some newspaper organizations on access to social media. Several journalists complained about outdated information from organizational sources.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of 42 critical incidents of information finding by journalists in five Kuwaiti newspapers indicated that they frequently use Internet for finding information. Their assignments are focused

in four areas; political, cultural, business and sports. They give more importance to quality of information and accessibility when they select information sources. Even though they were concerned about the objectivity, they still thought that websites were the most useful sources for gathering information for journalistic assignments. From information gleaned from the critical incidents, we came to the conclusion that there was a need to discuss it further with a selected group of journalists so as to come up with more meaningful conclusions from the results of the first phase of the study.

In the second phase of the study, conclusions drawn from the analysis of critical incidents will be discussed with selected respondents to probe why they did not think of the sources which were available through their organizations. If they thought of the organizational sources but they were not able to use these effectively, what were the reasons that these sources/channels were not of help. The follow up discussion will then focus on how the available services can be made more useful. The discussion will be based on lead questions which had been designed after a careful review of existing services and sources available either in-house or can be accessed or used through information intermediaries. These contain several types of sources including printed and online sources available through library and information services; corporate intranet; enterprise portal; and local or outside communities of practice.

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