

Using History to Study Everyday Information-Seeking Behavior in America: The Case of Car Buying

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ABSTRACT

Traditional scholarship on everyday information-seeking behavior has focused on approaches that provide a snapshot in time of what is going on in a household. This poster explores the use of history to examine changes over time in both information questions and information sources used in the prosecution of everyday life activities in America. The study is based on identifying endogenous and exogenous forces to the activity at hand, and seeing how these forces cause change. A secondary question raised in this poster is the largely unexamined belief that the Internet has played an exceptional role in changing the nature of everyday information seeking behavior in America. The case of 100 years of car buying in America is used as a particular example, drawn from a larger study of nine everyday American activities.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.2 History of Computing, K.4 Computers and Society

General Terms

Economics, Legal Factors, Design, Documentation

Keywords

Information-seeking behavior, information in everyday life, automobile, dealership, safety, environmental movement, suburbanization, war, Depression, advertising

1. The Case of Car Buying

Traditional scholarship on everyday information-seeking behavior has focused on approaches that provide a snapshot in time of what is going on in a household. These include, for example, ethnographic study, reader-reception theory coming out of media studies, and certain kinds of critical theory. (Wellman and Haythornthwaite; Bakardjieva; Lally; de Certeau) Sociologist Andrew Abbott has demonstrated the power that arises from examining a problem of this sort dynamically rather than statically. This research explores the use of history to examine changes over time in both information questions and information sources used when carrying out everyday life activities in America. The study is based on identifying endogenous and exogenous forces to the activity at hand, and seeing how these forces cause change. A secondary question raised in this research

is the largely unexamined belief that the Internet has played an exceptional role in changing the nature of everyday information seeking behavior in America.

The case examined here is an examination of car buying over the past 100 years. It is part of a larger study of nine examples of everyday information-seeking behavior: car buying, personal philanthropy, airline travel, genealogy, sports, gourmet cooking, seeking government information, political involvement, comic reading, and text messaging as a youth identity means. (Aspray and Hayes).

The research identifies a class of forces endogenous to the automobile and its industry, which include: advances in technology (such as tires, electric starters, automatic transmissions, and safety features such as safety belts, safety glass, and ABS braking systems); the rise and evolution of the dealership system; the develop of a consumer credit system for purchasing automobiles in the 1920s and for leasing after World War 2; and the rise of foreign competition first from Europe and later from Asia.

The research also identifies a larger class of forces exogenous to automobiles and their industry, which include: the general economic climate in America, especially the Great Depression of the 1930s; the suspension of automobile production during the Second World War; the rise of professional advertising during the same years as the development of the modern automobile as a mass market device instead of being a device for hobbyists; the rise of suburbanization and the growth of women in the workforce, which increased the need for a second car in American households; the environmental movement, which caused people to begin discussions of both pollution created by automobiles and the desire for more fuel-efficient automobiles; the rise of the consumer movement especially since the 1970s, which helped to redress information asymmetries between individuals and corporations; the rise of new media, such as television and the Internet as new venues for gaining information about automobiles; and the development of complementary industries such as oil, road construction, motels, and fast food restaurants.

The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the information issues and information sources as they changed over time for American car buyers. The number of potential sources is large and the amount of information could easily fill many volumes, so the intention is to be reliable but selective. Before turning to the historical literature, we surveyed the social science literature that informs the car buying decision. For example, there

is an economics literature that discusses the amount of search required to optimize a car purchase decision, and a psychology literature that discusses consumer behavior, often associated with what happens when potential buyers visit a dealership. When examining the secondary historical literature, we sampled from the enormous literature on cars. Sampling this literature helped us to identify general forces and trends that shaped the production and use of cars over the 100 years studied, even though most of this literature is about the supply rather than the demand side.

In order to understand better the demand side, i.e. the way in which owners and potential buyers of cars responded to the changing car environment, we needed to use primary source materials. These included runs of magazines read widely by Americans and archival material about car sales, such as general magazines (Saturday Evening Post), consumer magazines (Consumer Reports), auto enthusiast magazines (Road & Track), and personal finance magazines (Kiplinger's). We examined every car article in long runs of several magazines from each of these types of magazines. Had there been diaries of people's car buying decisions, they would have been useful; but we did not find them.

When choosing magazine articles, it is important to minimize bias in the source material. For example, one might be concerned that if one examines articles from one magazine about the 1930s and a different magazine about the 1960s, some of the differences noted in the articles from these two periods might be an artifact of the different editorial policies and intended readerships of the two magazines. One means for avoiding this research bias is to select from magazines that have long issue runs, such as Saturday Evening Post, which from the 1920s through the 1980s was a major magazine advertising venue of carmakers. All of the primary sources we examined gave only indirect evidence of what questions Americans were asking about cars.

We found in the study that there were some changes in the sources over time. Some sources, such as family and friends, general-purpose magazines, and the local garage mechanic, stayed constant over time. Some other sources became important in the car purchase decision only after the Second World War, such as consumer magazines and hobbyist magazines. Newly introduced media, including radio, television, and the Internet, were employed in advertising automobiles as soon as they became available; and the auto manufacturers were heavy advertisers throughout this entire hundred year period. The Internet was different from the earlier media because it was not entirely controlled by the manufacturers; and indeed the Internet was a powerful leveling source in information asymmetry between individuals and the manufacturers or their dealerships. It is hard to determine what impact the consumer movement played in changing this information asymmetry; it might not only have been the media at play. For example, there are shows on both radio and television today that have the individual car owner in mind more than the interests of the manufacturers in pushing their products.

We found in the study that there were also some changes in the questions asked over time. Some questions were asked throughout this hundred-year period: what is the latest technology? Which cars incorporated it? What was the pricing? Some questions did not arise until later years: questions about fuel economy of cars was not an issue until the 1960s, for until then

gasoline was inexpensive and the United States produced more oil than it consumed. Despite smog appearing in Los Angeles in the 1950s, it was not until the 1970s with Rachel Carson's Silent Spring and Ralph Nader's concern about car safety that there was much sensitivity among buyers about environmental or safety issues. A push by Ford in the 1940s to sell cars on their safety features, for example, was a major failure. Local dealer quality did not become a major issue of buyers until the 1960s when the laws went out of effect that limited dealers to selling only in their own geographic region. Quietness was a concern of buyers in the 1920s and the 1990s but not in the era of muscular cars of the 1950s. These are only some examples of the change in questions being raised.

This car study, together with the other case studies mentioned above, provide new information about the nature of exogenous and endogenous forces that shaped information-seeking behavior in everyday American life, the change over time in the questions asked and the sources used, and the reticular role of the Internet as an exogenous force. We will also reflect on the use of history as a tool to advance our understanding of information-seeking behavior in everyday life contexts.

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