Mapping the road ahead: understanding social factors that shape vehicle residents' information grounds

Kaitlin E. Montague
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Abstract

Introduction. An estimated one million people currently inhabit vehicles as their primary method of housing in publicly accessible areas across the United States. Few studies have investigated this untraditionally housed population, as separate from traditional homelessness, and no other studies have been found that currently explore vehicle resident's information behaviours. This paper offers preliminary findings from an ethnographic study that explores vehicle residents' information practices.

Method. This work is based on four months of ethnographic research involving participant observation in Santa Cruz, California, which aimed to understand vehicle residents' information needs and access and the ways that various factors shaped their information practices.

Analysis. Ethnographic field notes were analysed using the constant comparative method. Induction was used to identify and categorize recurring conceptualizations and phenomena.

Results. Preliminary findings build upon previous research on information grounds. Initial results indicate that marginalizing policies, and in turn, social exclusion, created vibrant environments for information grounds to develop.

Conclusion. Geographic locations and movements influence vehicle residents' information practices. Gaining a deeper understanding of these practices inform both theoretical implications for the information behaviour field and practical implications for local and federal governments to deliver support rather than create marginalizing policies for vehicle residents.

Introduction

As unsheltered homelessness is growing in the Western United States (US), the habitation of vehicles as an affordable housing option is increasing (Berton, 2020; Carlton and Parker, 2020; Giamarino et al., 2023). Local governments rely on *punitive pushes* (Pruss and Cheng, 2020) to control vehicle residency's burgeoning growth, while activists and a budding group of researchers work to reduce the harm and precariousness of living in vehicles by reforming punitive vehicle towing and vehicle dwelling regulations (Giamarino et al., 2023; Pruss, 2023). This study aims to add to this nascent group of research by investigating vehicle residents' information practices in Santa Cruz, California (CA), a coastal community with a historically large vehicle residency population, that recently passed a law to banish *oversized* vehicles from city limits. Understanding vehicle residents from an information access perspective is an innovative concept (Montague, 2023) and it can shift the development of social policy by offering research-based assistance to highlight the information resources that this population uses most while also identifying gaps where services can be created.

Literature review

While this population is still new to research, especially to information behaviour, there are parallels between vehicle residents and migrants. A feature of resettling in a new environment is the disruption of knowledge and the need to establish new networks and information sources (Lloyd, 2014). Vehicle residents' information landscapes are disrupted and reconstructed at fast rates, amplifying the already existing stresses of finding accurate, applicable information in new locations (Montague, 2022).

Previous research highlights the precarity migrants face while moving to new countries, resulting in social exclusion due to their lack of access to pertinent information resources, social capital, economic resources, and the local understanding of insiders in the new community (Bronstein, 2017, 2019; Shuva, 2020). This research sparked a focus on vulnerable populations and how they experience isolation from conventional information sources (Allard and Caidi, 2018; Clark-Parsons and Lingel, 2020). Information plays a crucial role in integrating migrants into new communities because they often find themselves in the precariousness of transition (Ruthven, 2022) and must negotiate new cultural identities in *alien information environments* (Mehra and Papajohn, 2007), impacting their information landscapes (Lloyd, 2017). This paper presents preliminary findings from an ethnographic study conducted in Santa Cruz to understand the various social factors that impact vehicle residents' social exclusion, resulting in the foundation of what Pettigrew (1999) calls *information grounds* in several areas of the city.

Pettigrew (1999) defines information grounds as *'synergistic environment[s] temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information'* (p. 811). Kelder and Lueg (2011) emphasize the importance of incidental information sharing activities, a critical component of information grounds. They can occur anywhere, be attended by diverse social classes (Counts and Fisher, 2010), and are places where social interactions occur, fostering information sharing and use (Khoir et al., 2014). Information grounds create strong ties to social interactions based on individual's natural disposition for socially constructing and sharing information (Fisher et al., 2005).

Fisher and Naumer (2006) postulate that information grounds are predicated on the presence of individuals and their social interactions (Fig. 1).

Fisher and Naumer's (2006) Information Grounds Propositions

P1: People gather at "information grounds" for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing.

P2: Information grounds are attended by different social types, most if not all of whom play expected and important, albeit different roles in information flow.

P3: Social interaction is a primary activity at "information grounds" such that information flow is a by-product.

P4: People engage in formal and informal information sharing, and information flow occurs in many directions.

P5: Information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting, and are predicated on the presence of individuals.

P6: People use information obtained at "information grounds" in various ways, and derive benefit from it along physical, social, affective and cognitive dimensions.

P7: Many sub-contexts exist within an "information ground" and are based on people's perspectives and physical factors. Together these sub-contexts form a grand context.

Fig. 1. Depicts Fisher and Naumer's (2006) seven information grounds propositions.

However, the field has not investigated how social factors push individuals to specific environments. People gather at information grounds for a primary purpose other than information sharing. Through social isolation and spatial control, vehicle residents are pushed to various locations around the city, offering opportunity for information sharing in these places.

Research questions

This paper is not intended to address each research question in its entirety; however, the following set of research questions guided this research study, design, and implementation:

RQ1. What are vehicle residents' information practices?

    RQ1a. How do they access information necessary to support their daily lives?

RQ2. How does place and mobility impact vehicle residents' information access?

    RQ2a. How do they decide where to park?

RQ2b. How are their decisions shaped by their perceptions of parking policies and regulations?

Methods
Data collection

During fieldwork from June–October 2023, I met a community of vehicle residents living in Santa Cruz. Data was collected through observations, conversations, and interviews. I connected with my first small group of participants after observing the same parking lot for two weeks. I chose vehicles where females were present for safety purposes as I am a female conducting fieldwork alone. I spoke to 16 participants in total (ages ranged from 25-63) and interacted with ten regularly. All participants met study criteria: 18 or older and lived full-time in a vehicle. Participants helped me create my own setup to sleep in my own vehicle. I began spending one to two evenings a week parking and sleeping near participants, learning about where they park, and why, to

better understand their immediate information environments.

I learned about participants daily routes and routines and how they obtain necessary information to sustain this lifestyle. I recorded some conversations to offer my full attention and, other times, took notes to record verbatim quotes. After each field site trip, I took fieldnotes to capture each day (Emerson et al., 2011).

Data analysis

I transcribed recorded audio conversations as a means of staying close to the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). I generated a preliminarily dataset by analysing 24 hours of audio transcripts and 57 pages of field notes field notes using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014), which includes iterative open coding to identify themes and illustrative quotations. During content analysis, I used induction to identify and categorize recurring conceptualizations and phenomena, then refined them by constantly comparing newly emerging patterns with past patterns (Miles et al., 2020).

Preliminary findings and discussion

Preliminary data analysis revealed the development of three information grounds in Santa Cruz: Steamer Lane, Greyhound Rock, and Church St. These information grounds have been structured by local policies. For instance, Santa Cruz recently passed the "OVO" (Oversized Vehicle Ordinance) banning oversized vehicles (more than 20 feet in length or more than 8 feet tall) from the city through ticketing and criminalization. These policies push vehicle residents to specific parts of town during different hours. Many lots prohibit parking from dusk to dawn and city parking is paid parking from 8am-8pm. Temporal parking bans push vehicle residents downtown from 8pm-8am or to Greyhound Rock—a remote parking lot out of cell phone and Wi-Fi service on the coast north of Santa Cruz. Policies that exacerbate social exclusion perpetuate information inequities by pushing vehicle residents to the margins where they cannot maintain a cellular service connection to remain in touch with employers, social services, or social networks. Socio-legal frameworks that structurally and spatially contain vehicle residents have been explored (Pruss, 2023); however, my preliminary findings offer new insights from an information perspective. Despite the marginalization of this community, punitive policies laid the foundation to create vibrant information sharing spaces, resulting in information grounds.
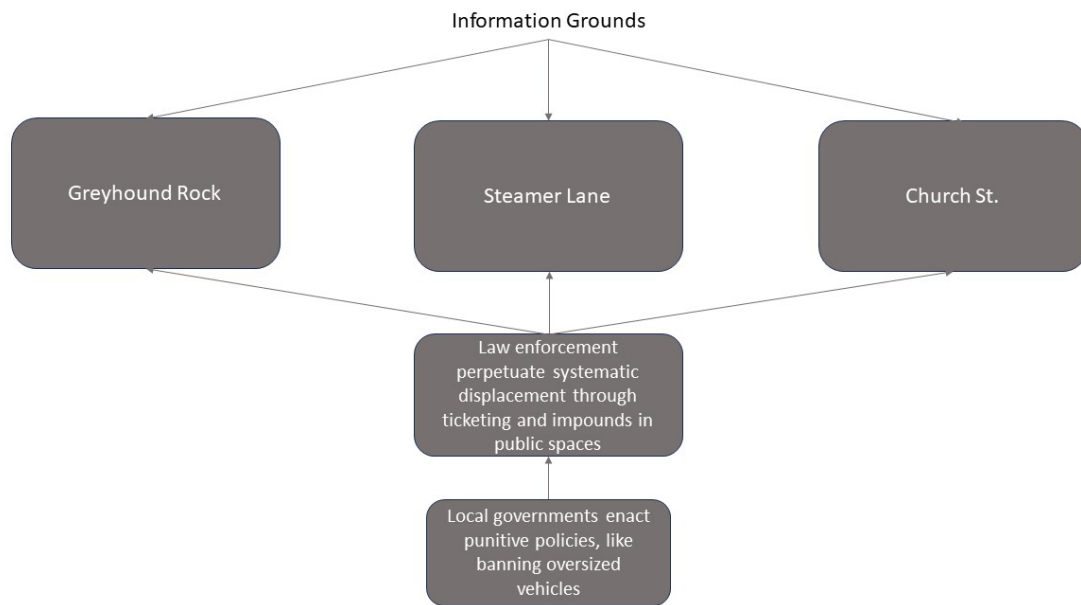
Fig 2. Depicts a process model for the creation of vehicle residents' information grounds in Santa Cruz, CA.

Figure 2 depicts the exclusion process initiated by local governments which is then implemented by law enforcement through various *punitive pushes* (Pruss and Cheng, 2020) such as location-based bans and ticketing, perpetuating systemic displacement.

These parking regulations, like others in cities across the US, were pragmatically motivated. These regulations restrict *oversized* vehicles from parking overnight in town and the widespread installation of signs that read 'No *parking midnight to 6am every day*' (Fig. 3).

Fig 3. Depicts signage enforcing parking policies in Downtown Santa Cruz, CA.

One participant, Joanne, explained, '*Invention is bred of necessity. And when we're pushed out of one place, we're going to get creative and figure out where we can be and how we can support each other.*' Through trial and error, vehicle residents spend every day dodging temporal parking policies while navigating and living in public spaces within the confines of their personally owned vehicle. This process led to vehicle residents' congregating at specific locations during different times of the day and these locations morphed into information grounds. The following three sections describe the environments where information grounds arose due to legal, punitive pushes.

Steamer Lane

Steamer Lane is located on the Pacific coast where the Monterey Bay and Pacific Ocean meet. Parking regulations read '*No parking dusk to dawn.*' Each lot is gated and locked after sunset. The coast is lined with waterfront view parking lots as this is a world-renowned surfing spot. SUVs and small vans line the streets filled with surfboards, making this an ideal location where vehicle residents can camouflage during the day. This lot is free to park during the day, welcoming vehicle residents after sunrise with public restrooms and a small café. I often met my participants here and experienced their information sharing within the community.

Vehicle residents from various economic classes tended to park in specific parking lots. Michael explained:

> *Even on the lowest rungs of society we have a class system. Those guys…well they're druggies. They meet here to barter and sometimes share drugs. Not quite in their right mind. The lot over there, well, they're tourists. They have no idea what goes on here. And then there's Lot C, our lot, where us folks park for the day on our days off [work]. If we're not working, most of us are here. We get this view and the breeze.*

Over time, I learned that participants in Lot C shared information about safe places to park, shady places to escape the sun during the day, and free meals from Food Not Bombs (a local organization that provides free meals on the weekends). Participants also met in this lot to troubleshoot and fix each other's vehicles, working together to problem solve.

Greyhound Rock

Greyhound Rock is about 30 minutes north of Santa Cruz off Highway 1. There are no parking regulations; however, this location is out of service and Wi-Fi range, making it difficult to stay connected. Many vehicle residents met here in the evenings, while others avoided this

safer spot because it lacked information access. At Steamer Lane, Michael and Sean discussed Greyhound Rock. Michael was trying to convince Sean to come for the evening, but Sean explained, '*I can't. There's no cell service out there and I need to be reachable. I'm waiting on a phone call for a new job.*' Participants like Sean opted for information access over safer places to park.

Church St.

City Hall is situated on Church St. near the public library. Sean and Joanne, among other vehicle residents, park on Church St. overnight. Parking is free from 8pm-8am and they found free 24-hour Wi-Fi on this block. Sean and Joanne, among others, choose to remain in town overnight, taking advantage of free Wi-Fi in exchange for a more boisterous scene and risking potential encounters with law enforcement. Internet access is often their priority at the end of the day. Information grounds, in this case, are shaped based on information access opportunities. Whereas others, like Greyhound Rock, are shaped due to its safe location and inaccessibility.

Limitations, future directions, and conclusion

The small sample size poses limitations like generalizability, snowball sampling, and accessibility. I recruited participants where women were present for my own safety, which impacted my sample. Additionally, I was an outsider in a vulnerable community, and gaining trust and rapport was difficult, even after four months in the field.

Future directions will expand on this work with a larger, more diverse sample using ethnographic methods, information horizon interviews, and guided tours of participants' vehicles. Forthcoming work will delve into the information sources that vehicle residents use to support their everyday, while providing a more comprehensive understanding of ways that mobility is deeply embedded in their information seeking process.

Preliminary implications add to information behaviour literature by delving into the social process that formed information grounds. Echoing Bronstein (2017), vehicle residents' marginalization resulted in social exclusion; however, these findings reveal that vehicle residents, through social and spatial control, are pushed to the margins together, creating vibrant environments for information sharing. Gaining a deeper understanding of these practices inform both theoretical implications for the field and practical implications for governments to deliver support rather than create marginalizing policies for vehicle residents.

About the author

Kaitlin E. Montague, MI is a PhD candidate from Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey, at the School of Communication and Information in the Department of Library and Information Science (LIS). Her research focuses on vehicle residents' information practices and their most prevalent information resources and source preferences to support their daily lives using ethnographic and visual methods. Kaitlin's aim is to understand how information institutions, namely public libraries, can create service provisions to help support this marginalized community. She also explores the ways that place and mobility impact information access and sharing among this population. Kaitlin received a Master of Information (MI) from Rutgers in 2016. She worked as a public librarian for four years before returning to Rutgers to begin the PhD program in LIS.

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