

MAVERICKS, MAVENS AND SOCIAL CONNECTORS: COMPUTER-MEDIATED INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR IN RURAL SOCIETIES

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Abstract: This paper discusses what we see as the critical role of individuals and their information seeking behaviour when using information and communication technology (ICT). In a study of several villages in northern Peru, we found that the role of particular individuals was critical in popularising ICT use in those communities. These individuals tended to be people who enjoyed passing on information, and also people who had larger networks than their peers. In this paper, we explore how theories of information seeking, together with social capital theory, might combine to provide a framework to enable further study of such behaviour. We discuss this framework with some illustrations from a case study. We conclude by calling for more research into the role of the individual in ICT for development projects from this perspective.

Keywords: Information seeking behaviour, social capital, computer-mediated information, sense-making.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the popular and groundbreaking book *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell (2002) talks of the importance of certain types of people in promoting trends. He introduces the concepts of ‘connectors’ – those individuals who have a gregarious nature and extensive social networks, ‘mavens’ – those individuals who act as information brokers and like nothing better than to educate and help, and ‘mavericks’ – those individuals who are independent thinkers. We uncovered some of these traits in individuals who helped popularise information and communication technology (ICT) use in their rural communities in northern regional Peru in our previous research, where we found that the role and status of some individuals in their community was of significance in disseminating computer-mediated information through their traditional face-to-face networks; these individuals tended to have urban connections, were focused on information of all kinds and showed certain degree of distinctiveness compared to their peers in their own communities (Díaz Andrade & Urquhart, 2009).

In this paper, we seek to extend our understanding of how individuals use and disseminate computer-mediated information in their social capital networks, synthesising theories of information seeking with those of social capital. In producing such a theoretical framework, we plan to explore what we feel is a hitherto under researched area – the role of individuals in popularising computer use in developing countries. Even though development agencies do pay attention to the role of individuals in stakeholder analysis (cf. Dearden, CIDT, Jones, & Sartorius, 2002), there are no specific insights available as to how individuals might engage with ICTs with the purpose of information seeking, especially from a theoretical perspective. Thus the research problem that this paper addresses is:

How do information-seeking theories extend our understanding of individual use of computer-mediated information within their social networks in a rural context in a developing country?

This paper is organised into five sections including this introduction. In the next section, we discuss theories of information seeking, in particular information in its social context and information as a social construct. In the third section, we discuss social capital theory in relation to information, focusing particularly on the cognitive domain in social capital networks. In the fourth section, we put forward an initial theoretical framework based on these two bodies of theory. Finally, we discuss the implications of our framework and relate the theoretical discussion to the findings from our earlier research, explaining the role of individuals who actively use ICT in a rural context.

2. INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

Our starting point is the notion of information seeking behaviour. Information seeking behaviour involves “those activities a person may engage in when identifying his or her own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information” (Wilson, 1999, p. 249). It is clear from this definition that the information seeking process starts with recognising a problematic situation that requires information to be addressed properly and may include the passing on of that information. This last part of the process is of particular interest, as will be explained later on in this paper.

Since information becomes the central element in the information seeking behaviour discussion, we present next a theoretical elaboration on this concept.

2.1. Information

Among the different definitions of information provided by the Oxford Dictionary we consider the following two relevant to our discussion. The first one implies the agency action, “Knowledge or facts communicated about a particular subject, event, etc.; intelligence, news”; the second one renders information an inert character, “Without necessary relation to a recipient: that which inheres in or is represented by a particular arrangement, sequence, or set, that may be stored in, transferred by, and responded to by inanimate things” (Trumble, Stevenson, & Brown, 2002, vol. 1, p. 1371). These definitions allow us to expand our discussion on information in general and information seeking, and transmission, in particular. While the first meaning makes explicit the participation of humans in the communication process, the second one hints that humans can be kept out of the process of manipulating information, conceding its living status (cf. actor-network theory, Latour, 1999; Law, 1999).

These conflicting definitions reflect a deeper ontological divergence on what information really is. On the one hand, some authors see information as an objective and inert instrument (Benkler, 2006; Foray, 2004). Stonier (1990, cited by Webster, 2002) affirms that “Information exists. It does not need to be perceived to exist. It does not need to be understood to exist. It requires no intelligence to interpret it. It does not have meaning to exist. It exists” (p. 24). The underlying assumption in this definition is that information can be objectively obtained; that is, information can exist independently of the observer. On the other hand, some scholars grant information more subjective and contextually-bounded characteristics whereby it can be interpreted in many different ways for different purposes (Castells, 2000b; Galliers, 2004). In the latter view, information requires the agency to have meaning.

In this article, we perceive information as a product of human interaction that conveys a common meaning to a particular group of individuals. Thus, we favour Dervin’s (1977) definition of information, which is “essentially seen as a tool that is valuable and useful to people in their attempts to cope with their lives. Information is seen as something that reduces uncertainty. As the individual moves through... the time-space continuum that makes up life... it is assumed that information can both describe and predict that reality and thus allow the individual to move more effectively” (p. 18). This definition confers information the quality of being situated and recognises that information needs an actor that can interpret it and act upon it in a specific time and space context (cf. Giddens' structuration theory, 1984). Indeed, Dervin (1991) calls to avoid conceptualising information as a thing. This approach amounts to considering information as a social construct, which is “evaluated, transmitted and propagated through social relations and interactions” (Castelfranchi, 2002, p. 384).

2.2. Sense-making

Given that we are adopting the idea of information as a social construct, it is necessary to consider how information is passed to others, and how information is interpreted. The traditional transmission model of communication, whereby the sender sends a message through a communication channel to a receiver, has been much criticised for its linear – and rather simplistic – approach. Dervin (1980) convincingly argues that information transmission is not as simple as just dumping information into someone else’s head; closing the information gap between the sender and the receiver requires a clear understanding of the context of the information transmission process. In order to be effective, the information

transmission process needs a receiver-oriented approach, instead of heavily relying on the sender (Dervin, 1980).

Neither a system-centred approach – which attempts to predict information-seeking depending on the topic (e.g., health information as opposed to economic information) – nor an individual-centred approach – which emphasises personal traits as predictors of information seeking (e.g., demographic profile) – are compelling enough for developing a theory on information seeking behaviour (Dervin, 1992). Alternatively, the sense-making model offers a constructivist approach that takes into consideration the time-space-bound context in order to explain how individuals interpret their experience in problematic situations with an emphasis on the role of the receiver of information in any effort of information transmission (Dervin, 1992, 1999a, 1999b). At the heart of the sense-making model is the cognitive gap that individuals face in ever-changing situations and dynamic, rather than static, process of information seeking (Dervin, 1993). Information seekers should be understood from their own perspectives and situations when “constructing cognitive bridges across [information] gaps” (Dervin, 1989, p. 223). It must be noted that the gap-closing action is motivated by purposes defined by the information seeker and not by the sender, who may or may not be immersed in the receiver’s worldview. Moreover, existing social structures affect how individuals close the information gap (Gladwell, 2002; Johnson, 2007).

In order to address our research question, we are particularly interested in the individual actors’ motivations for finding computer-mediated information, and how it is linked to their collective group’s interest. Thus, we settled on Dervin’s (1989) actor-defined purposes framework, which makes a distinction between the information seeking purposes of individual actors and collective actors (those that act as intermediaries within a social system) as shown in Table 1. It should be noted that these two subsets of purposes are not exclusive; indeed, we see some degree of overlap since the collective actor is an entity grouping individual actors.

Individual actor	Collective actor
1. To get ideas	1. To educate
2. To find direction	2. To interconnect
3. To acquire skills	3. To achieve consensus
4. To connect with others	4. To raise morale
5. To get support	5. To anchor culturally
6. To be happy	
7. To achieve goals	
8. To belong	
9. To design	
10. To discover	
11. To stimulate	
12. To be heard	
13. To get diverse input	

Table 1: Purposes defined by actors when seeking information (adapted from Dervin, 1989)

In our daily lives of information seeking, we identify different sources of information: people (i.e., relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances) to whom we may approach for any specific need of information; media (i.e., newspapers, magazines, radio and TV), which give general information on current events; libraries that provide authoritative information (which may not be the one that people need for their everyday life); and

computer-mediated information (including databases, the Internet and virtual contacts). We highlight that it is the cultural context what makes information relevant, which otherwise may be off the point; moreover, cultural background explains why “most information transfer occurs informally, between friends and colleagues” (Dervin, 1989, p. 224). It is daily practices that influence individuals’ information-seeking habits, since interpersonal communication and social networks are key factors affecting information behaviour (Savolainen, 1995). While this information exchange between friends and colleagues may be considered as the least effort option (Case, 2002), it is nonetheless largely the most important for us. This observation reinforces our argument that information seeking has a cultural context. This last reflection brings us to the concept of social capital.

3. SOCIAL CAPITAL

Individuals are not isolated entities; the human predisposition to constitute strong connections to social groups is well recognised (Simon, 2002). Social capital can be said to have three authors who have introduced it to the current theoretical debate: Bourdieu (1983), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993). Bourdieu (1983), from a Marxist perspective, coined the term social capital and defined it as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 248). Coleman (1988) conceptualises it as a productive function, which makes “possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 98). Putnam, who can be credited with popularising the concept, takes a communitarian perspective and sees social capital as the characteristics of “social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam et al., 1993, p. 167) through their linked rules of reciprocity (Putnam, 1993).

Putnam et al.’s (1993) definition identifies three components of social capital. Although an elusive concept, trust is a key characteristic of interpersonal relationships and can be defined as the positive reliance on other parties’ obligations (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003; Adler & Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1988). Norms are the accepted behaviour patterns for the members of a social system (North, 1990; Rogers, 2003) and networks represent the material support for the transactions (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Putnam et al., 1993). The unspoken, yet fundamental, element the above definitions have in common is social interactions; in the absence of social interactions, social capital would not exist.

We have chosen to use the definition put forward by Adler and Kwon (2002): “Social capital is the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor’s social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor” (p. 23). First, this definition of social capital makes explicit that social capital can be accessible to both individuals and groups, which will allow us to observe the information seeking behaviour of individuals within a larger community and how the information transits between them. Second, it directs the attention to the elements constituting the network and the nature of the goods, which can be tangible (e.g., money) or intangible (e.g., favours), transacted throughout the network; this characteristic allows us to contextualise the components of the information seeking process. Third, it recognises that information – along with power and reciprocity – takes part in the social interactions.

The previous descriptions emphasise the value of collective action and what networks can achieve, while recognising social capital as a strengthening element for network building. However, since we recognise that not all forms of association necessarily lead to the benefit of the community, we do not take a normative stance on the concept of social capital. The

interested reader can find a discussion on the negative sides of social capital in Field (2003); Field, Schuller & Baron (2000); Portes (1998) and Simon (2002).

3.1. Social capital domains

Huysman (2004) proposes three domains of social capital: structural opportunity, cognitive ability and relation-based motivation, as shown in Table 2.

Domain	Constitutive elements
Structural opportunity for social capital transaction	Network ties and network configuration, including appropriable organisations
Cognitive ability for social capital transaction	Competences and resources that individuals in the network have through common systems of meaning
Relation-based motivation for social capital transaction	Linkages developed through consecutive contacts with each other based on tacit reciprocity rules

Table 2: Social capital domains (adapted from Huysman, 2004)

These domains should prove to be useful in understanding why and how some individuals embrace the task of not only seeking computer-mediated information but also distributing it among their fellow villagers. The structural opportunity domain is represented by the interaction between human beings, which may take place within social structures represented by both face-to-face and virtual networks (Castells, 2000a). Hence, the “who transacts” and the “how transacted” are the elements to be analysed under this domain (Huysman, 2004). The cognitive ability domain refers to “communicative competence”, the human beings’ capability to communicate with each other with intelligibility and to transform information effectively (Szreter, 2000). The “what is transacted” is to be examined in this domain (Huysman, 2004). The relation-based motivation domain implies reciprocity and trust which contribute to the expansion of networks and are tacit forms of understanding to achieve common objectives (Brown & Lauder, 2000). The “why the transaction” takes place is scrutinised within this domain (Huysman, 2004).

In this study, the focus is informal social capital, which involves trust, norms, reciprocity, networks and connections among individuals, as opposed to formal social capital, which takes place among distinguishable collective entities (MacGillivray & Walker, 2000) – e.g., businesses and government agencies. Rather than exchanging goods or services in these informal interactions, we expect to see information being symmetrically transacted in a diffuse and tacit manner (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

4. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF INFORMATION SEEKING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

This framework aims at understanding individual purposes for seeking computer-mediated information, and how the information-seekers’ context and their social group bound the search. We recognise that social context implicitly constrains the possibilities of topics to be searched; our assumption is that the information seeker will not look for something that is not part of their universe. The social group plays a key role in defining the search alternatives, because ultimately it is they who will be fed the obtained computer-mediated information that

is distributed through face-to-face interactions by word-of-mouth. Instead of analysing the feasibility of replicating social capital characteristics on virtual networks (cf. Putnam, 2000), our interest is extending our understanding of how social capital networks affect individual's information-seeking behaviour in a rural setting. We do not expect that computer-mediated information and virtual interactions will replace substitute face-to-face contacts; rather we foresee a complementary effect (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

In the framework shown in Figure 1, we bring together Huysman's (2004) dimensions of social capital and Dervin's (1989) defined purposes of seeking information for both the individual and the collective actors. We contend that this framework will allow us to understand how the community influences the individual's search effort, as well as how the information gathered from computers is distributed throughout the existing social networks. These actor-defined purposes (Dervin, 1989) give us insight into the type of information seeking that might be occurring along the three social capital dimensions (Huysman, 2004), and give us a further set of concepts for understanding how people might seek information in their social capital networks.

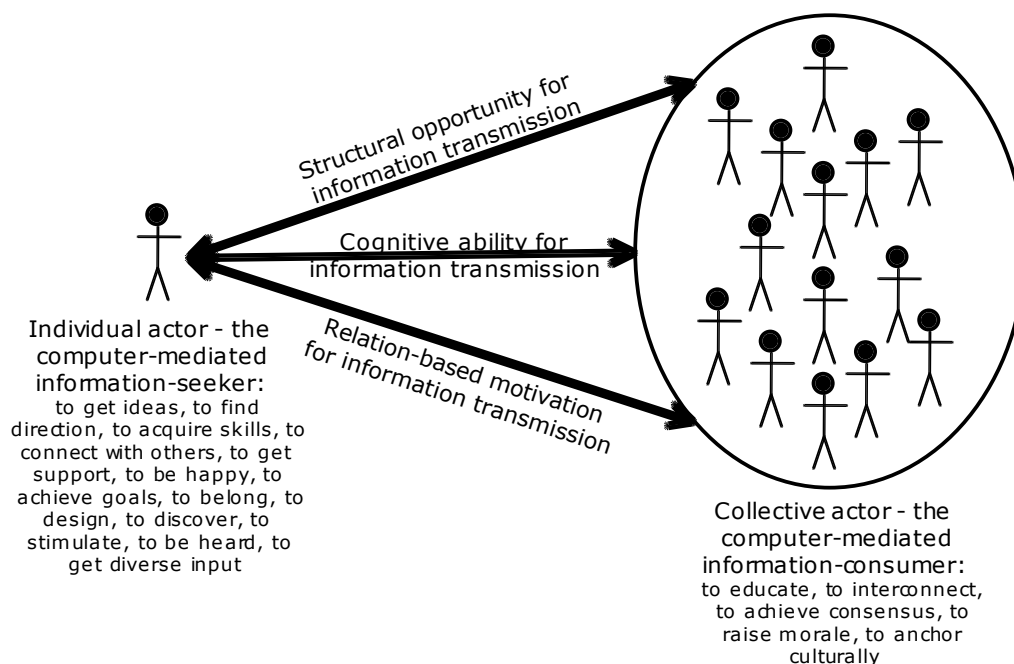


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of information seeking and social capital

While the actor-defined purposes represent specific activities and motivations in the information-seeking effort, the dimensions of social capital allow us to interpret the translation process from the micro-level – i.e., the individual actor – to the macro-level – i.e., the collective actor. This is the central argument of our proposed model.

5. GROUNDING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a way of illustrating the framework presented in Figure 1, we use it as a lens for the analysis of data collected between July and November 2005 in six rural communities in northern Peru. Among the primary sources of data, we had 32 in-depth interviews with participants coming from three groups of stakeholders: intended beneficiaries, managers of the purposed-built telecentres – known by the locals as infocentros – and the sponsors of the project that funded those infocentros in seven communities. In addition, we produced more than 200 pages of hand-written annotations and over 100 photographs. Among the secondary

sources, we had access to the project reports and demographic information provided by the national statistics agency. For this paper, we paid special attention to the transcripts from the interviews.

In our earlier research, we found while that people in the studied communities universally acknowledged the potential contribution of computers, only some individuals made an extra effort to learn how to use computers. These individuals were almost invariably informally trained, and keen on sharing the computer-mediated information with their fellow villagers. We named them “activators of information”, those who connect their local and traditional networks with their virtual and distant networks (Díaz Andrade & Urquhart, 2009). These individuals dynamically use information to build social and/or strengthen social capital and are very conscious of their place in the community. Therefore, we were interested in explaining this phenomenon further, and think that the proposed theoretical framework can assist us in this effort.

Presenting textual data is always a challenging task given the space limitations. Thus, we have been careful in selecting the participants’ expressions that best represent the notions represented in the theoretical framework. In Table 3 we present quotations from the participants reflecting the actor-defined purposes of individual actors when seeking information.

1. To get ideas	Edilberto, 25 (La Encañada infocentro manager): “Peasants used to visit me at the infocentro. ‘We have come to look for this [information] that we need; we were told that we can find it through the Internet’”.
2. To find direction	Anatolio, 19 (Puruay Alto): “Communication is important because some people give you solutions and advice”.
3. To acquire skills	Hermilio, 16 (Chanta Alta): “[My cousin] teaches me many things [like] MS Word® and MS Excel®, recording CDs with music and documents”.
4. To connect with others	Alejandro, 33 (Chanta Alta): “I have friends in other countries... They are from Colombia and Venezuela... I met them through the chat”.
5. To get support	Ramón, 32 (Huanico): “[I communicate by e-mail] mostly with my relatives who are in Cajamarca City... to ask for a doctor or someone who can help me on this issue”.
6. To be happy	Fernando, 23 (Puruay Alto infocentro manager): “Students exclaim, ‘Gee! If we had money we would come all the time. Chatting is awesome... It is exciting to be talking to other people’”.
7. To achieve goals	Sixto, 39 (La Encañada): “There are colleagues who know better than me about Internet. ‘I have this problem, what can I do?’ ‘Do in this way’. You know; it helps to improve ourselves”.
8. To belong	Justo, 40s (San Marcos): “I needed to be in touch with my classmates and lecturers at Universidad de Lima”.
9. To design	Liliana, 28 (San Marcos): “This computer is extremely useful for me, for my job and for everything we have to do at the municipality... I put all my ideas in there”.
10. To discover	Hugo, 16 (La Encañada): “Some friends in here have contacts in other countries. They put us through and we talk... how their weather is, and so on... ‘How is your country? Is it nice? Is the criminality rate too high?’”
11. To	Darío, 25 (Llacanora): “The infocentro manager should encourage people in

stimulate	the countryside... to come, to learn and let them know, 'I found this in the computer'. I think many people in the countryside do not know what a computer is... but they do not realise that there is something that may help in agriculture".
12. To be heard	Manuel, 16 (Huanico): "If you learn computers you would have the information you need to confront the authorities".
13. To get diverse input	César, 28 (Puruay Alto): "It is important to meet people from other places... because that is the way to development. And also we are informed how they work in that country, in that town, or that village, and how we work in here".

Table 3: Instances of individual actor's action-defined purposes

An examination of the aforementioned quotations reflects a wide range of motivation for individuals seeking information ranging from satisfying personal curiosity (e.g., meeting people overseas) to solving urgent issues (e.g., health related problems). It is possible to see these information seekers' orientation to computer-mediated information as classified in two major categories: cognitive oriented seekers and affective oriented seekers (Savolainen, 1995, citing from Erämetsä 1990). The former group has a preference for technical or cultural information, since they perceive it as an instrument for reaching a specific purpose sometime in the future. Conversely, the latter group perceives information as a means for immediate reward and its preferences are on amusement-style information, or "infotainment" (Webster, 2002, citing from Postman 1986). During our fieldwork we found both kinds of information seekers, but our current research interest is in the former group. Although all of them are driven by an internal stimulus (that is why they are classified as individual actor's action-defined purposes) it is clear that in the process of information seeking are other parties involved.

We present now in Table 4 some examples of the information seeking effort undertaken by collective actors. While we admit that most of the times an individual performs the task of retrieving information, she/he does so as a proxy of the group for practical reasons, especially in a developing country context such as in this study. It is hard to imagine the convenience of the crowd looking for a piece of information that is required by the group if it can be relatively easy obtained by one of them only; entrusting the responsibility to one individual will not only be more efficient but also probably more effective. We emphasise, however, that this information-search effort is motivated by, and the ultimate beneficiary will be, the collective actor.

1. To educate	Alejandro, (Chanta Alta): "I encourage my colleagues [stockbreeding technicians] to visit such and such website, to surf through the Internet, and review that".
2. To interconnect	Antero, 49 (Puruay Alto): "We can look for markets in other places".
3. To achieve consensus	Luz, 22 (San Marcos infocentro manager): "A number of [local] organisations and [governments agencies] used to come to organise the work and exchange information".
4. To raise morale	José, 21 (Llacanora): "My friends and I always go out from the town and observe what is going on in other places... [Then], we compare and realise that something is wrong in here".

5. To anchor culturally	Darío, 25 (Llacanora): “I am the founder of ALLATUAR (<i>Llacanora People Association for Action on Tourism, Agriculture and Handicraft</i>), a local organisation that seeks to promote businesses around tourism, agriculture and handicraft... computers can help us in promoting Llacanora”.
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Table 4: Instances of collective actor’s action-defined purposes

All the instances of action-defined purposes of information seeking shown in Tables 3 and 4 are not mutually exclusive; rather to the contrary, an overlap exists among them. For example, we can see common characteristics among “to acquire skills” (instance No. 3 in Table 3), “to discover” (instance No. 10 in Table 3) and “to raise morale” (instance No. 4 in Table 4). It is not a black or white choice; we maintain that it is a matter of degree what defines whether a particular participant’s expression falls within one action-defined purpose or the other.

So far we have presented the action-defined purposes of information seeking for both the individual and the collective actors. The remaining question is how the information gathered by the individual is transmitted to the social group and vice versa. What connects them – in other words, the missing link, we maintain is social capital: “the goodwill available to individuals or groups, [whose] source lies in the structure and content of the actor’s social relations” (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 23). Social capital dimensions (Huysman, 2004) provide us with the analytical elements to observe the transmission process in more detail. At this point, we discuss how the social capital dimensions allow us to see the interface linking the individual and collective actors’ information seeking behaviour.

The *structural* opportunity for information transmission is reflected by the mere fact of individuals interacting to each other. This interaction could be among individuals either in the vicinity (e.g., through the communal Peasant Organisation or the local council) or over the Internet. In instance No. 1 in Table 3, we see Edilberto interacting with local peasants motivated to get some information and in instance No. 3 in Table 4 Luz explained us how different organisations worked together to exchange information. Both examples illustrate the existence of links among individuals and (not necessarily formal) organisations in a more or less stable configuration whereby information is transmitted.

The *cognitive* ability for information transmission is exemplified, for the individual actor, by instances No. 7 and 13 in Table 3. They make explicit the need of a common set of meanings for rendering the seeking-information effort viable; if Sixto and César were not able to understand what their counterparts articulate, the exchange of information would be impossible. In Antero’s expression in instance No. 2 in Table 4 is implicit the requisite of a shared communicative understanding at the collective actor level; the fact of Antero’s using the third person in plural is indicative of his assumed representative role of the community – he embodies the collective actor – when suggesting the idea of identifying potential markets for Puruay Alto’s produce.

The *relation-based* motivation for information transmission conveys the idea of an established relationship. However, every established relationship started with an initial interaction; instances No. 4 and 6 in Table 3 illustrate these early contacts, while instance No. 8 shows a habitual communication. All these are examples of the individual actor seeking information. Conversely, instances No. 1 and 5 in Table 4 illustrate how the information transmission takes place at the collective level.

5.1. Mavens, mavericks and social connectors

Not only from what the participants said in interviews, but also from observation during the fieldwork, we can identify those individuals who share the characteristics, of mavens, mavericks or social connectors, to a greater or lesser degree. However, our intention is not to

label individuals in a rather deterministic fashion according to these three typologies; such an exercise will prove problematic and inaccurate. We aim at understanding how individuals use and disseminate computer-mediated information in their social capital networks, synthesising theories of information seeking with those of social capital. In this context, mavens, mavericks and social connectors are descriptors of actions that would shed light on how information is transmitted in a rural environment; we prefer to talk about *mavenry*, *maverickery* – taking a linguistics licence to the extreme – and *social connectivity*.

We observe that giving access to information through computers has a multiplier effect in the presence of *mavenry*. Individuals showing the traits of *mavenry* place a higher value on education than their fellow villagers; moreover, they are interested in educating others and generally tend to be receptive to new ideas, such as innovations in farming and stockbreeding. Their cognitive ability for information transmission becomes apparent in relatively small rural settings. The attributes of *maverickery* are the least manifest; it can be argued that it is visible when certain villagers challenge the status quo of their communities based on information they obtain from other places through computers and virtual friends in somewhere else. However, we found that this is sometimes a shared feeling among the villagers. This observation brings us to the next element.

Social connectivity is the most visible characteristic. In the area of northern Peru where this study took place, the ancient practice of communal work, and the strong influence of the communal organisations, are essential parts of the social network, and tacit reciprocity rules are noticeable. The existing cultural context fosters the passing on of information through the customary face-to-face contacts. It is these traditional and close interactions that make available to both the individual and collective actors the transmission of computer-mediated information. Indeed, computers can help people to overcome physical distance and can empower the information-disadvantaged (Rogers, Collins-Jarvis, & Schmitz, 1994).

6. CONCLUSION

Our current research is motivated by a question from our previous study: How do information-seeking theories extend our understanding of individual use of computer-mediated information within their social networks in a rural context in a developing country? At this point, we suggest that our combined framework of information seeking behaviour and social capital can inform us better about the role played by certain individuals in disseminating and seeking computer-mediated information. We propose that actor-defined purposes when searching for information (Dervin, 1989), along with social capital domains (Huysman, 2004) will allow us a finer grained understanding of this phenomenon.

By examining individual computer-mediated information seeking behaviour in rural communities in developing countries, and characterising that information seeking behaviour as a social construct in a cultural context, our proposed theoretical framework makes several contributions. First, we make a theoretical contribution by synthesising aspects of social capital theory with information seeking theory. While some might argue that Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) also focused on information by looking at knowledge and social capital, our focus here is on the role of the actors – both individual and collective – in their community with regard to information, allowing us to achieve a more information focused understanding of social capital dimensions. We think that looking at the individual and group information seeking motivations is as important as it gives us an insight into why certain projects might be successful. Secondly, looking at the sort of information that is valued, and transmitted especially in ICT for development projects, would give a guide to future such projects. Thirdly, we would contend that the framework focuses clearly on the role of the individual in ICT for development projects and that this is also a contribution given the lack of current

literature on the sometimes-critical role of individuals to the success of ICT for development. While Rogers (2003) stresses the importance of early adopters, no literature that we are aware of situates those individuals within their community. This last is an important point – we are not privileging the individual over the community and proposing some ‘great man’ theory whereby individual qualities make the difference – rather we contend that understanding the role of the individual *within their community* is critical and at present, understudied.

We would say that the computer enthusiasts in our previous study seemed to be more maven than maverick in their willingness to share; they are definitely social connectors and it is this process of connection through information that is of great interest to us. Our earlier research has indicated that this kind of behaviour may be more common than we might think. It is our hope that the framework put forward in this paper will assist us and other researchers in understanding the role of information and the individual in their community, in development-oriented ICT projects, particularly in small and remote rural communities in developing countries. We can also envisage broader applications of this framework – the most obvious being a finer grained consideration of knowledge transfer within organisations and between organisations. This framework would be particularly good for considering tacit aspects of knowledge transfer, by concentrating on the reasons people are motivated to share information, the types of information shared, and how that information is shared.

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