

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Hopkins Press Podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the Hopkins Press journals division. Our guest today is Maria Ortiz-Myers. Maria is a doctoral candidate in library and information science at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. Her research focuses on information practice, particularly collaborative information interactions and personally meaningful information experiences.

The journal *Library Trends* recently published her paper, titled "The Information Practices of Parents of Transgender and Non-Binary Youth: An Exploratory Study". She joined us to discuss her research on how families of transgender youth pursue and assess information.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Maria. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Maria Ortiz-Myers

I'm excited to talk to you.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The first question we like to ask all our guests is can you tell us what your academic origin story is? How did you come to study library information science?

Maria Ortiz-Myers

I think it's a bit boring. I had a first career in a completely different industry and decided to stay home with my kids for a while, and while they were in school, I started volunteering a long time ago, volunteering at my local library, and stayed with that until I got a paid job and just got really interested, and at the time that they started high school or maybe were in middle school I decided I'd like to do this for real for real. So, I went to graduate school and between my masters, I got my master's of information at Rutgers, here in New Brunswick, and in the two years between that and the PhD program just sort of being in this environment I just really got very excited about the idea of pursuing these things with real intellectual rigor and depth. You know, I know a lot of people have this experience of googling something and going down rabbit holes and that's just, it just makes my day. I love it. So, that's how I got here. I was a professional librarian briefly. I still consider myself a librarian, but the research angle came from being in this milieu and helping other academics do their research.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, first of all, I don't think that's boring at all. I think that's fantastic, and on a personal note I really totally understand what you're saying. I too stayed home with my kids, and when I started thinking about what I wanted to do for a job my sort of impossible dream job was a librarian, but that's not my background. My background is in marketing and communications so this position here, publishing, is the same kind of thing. I can think of literally anything and just look up and find research on it all day long and part of my job is to do that and it's just the rabbit holing. It's delicious fun.

And so, follow-up question, is your current line of study focused on LGBTQ information needs specifically, or is this paper sort of part of a broader range of study for you?

[Maria Ortiz-Myers](#)

Yes and. You know, all of my research comes from a somewhat personal place, so I know people who are members of the community, both as young adults through my kids, or kids of friends, or mentors, or other people in my life well before I had kids. So, the idea of marginalization and the issues that young people and families really face was really where I started. You know, it became clear to me as being a parent that there was a lot of parenting literature that told you how to handle things like the terrible twos or rebellion in young people but there was not a lot about how to coach and support and help young people who are not "the ideal." So, if your kid comes out as LGBTQ, that was not in how to parent 101, and I noted that even in the public library. That was not something that was super accessible. I should say that when my kids were in high school, I lived in the Kansas City metropolitan area, and I live in the New York City metropolitan area now. I live in North Central Jersey. So, that milieu also seemed to be a little bit of a challenge. It was the public library, so we had a lot of material for a lot of different perspectives, but the things that got challenged the most were issues of sexuality and gender identity, especially related to children. As I started to think about what to research and who I wanted to serve and these relationships in my life, it occurred to me that this was a population that wasn't necessarily represented in library collections and in information science in general.

[Mary Alice Yeskey](#)

Interesting, and I suspect, although correct me if I'm wrong, that your geographic experience might've, and I know you note this in your paper, that it does depend on where you live what kind of access you have to things.

[Maria Ortiz-Myers](#)

It does, yeah. I just finished an interview with a new parent who I had never, or a parent I had not interviewed before this paper, and they lived in New England, I guess, and one of the things they said to me was, oh, I'm a little less worried about it because I don't live in Texas, or I don't live someplace else. I also want to say, I don't want to give anyone the impression that there are not LIS scholars who are interested in LGBTQ people. There are. We have some really great

ones. What I'm specifically concerned with is young people and their parents, so I'm looking at the collaborative interchanges there, and that's a little less covered.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's an excellent segue because I want to make sure that our listeners sort of understand the ideas behind your research. Your study examines the information practices of parents of transgender and non-binary youth. Can you explain for anyone who might not be familiar with it what that means? What are information practices and why are they important?

Maria Ortiz-Myers

Sure. So, in information science, for quite a long time, there's been a lot of theorizing around the idea of what we call information behavior: the things that people do with information, how they look for information, how they evaluate and assess whether it's suitable for their needs, how they store information, that kind of thing. And somewhere, I'm gonna say in the 90s and early 2000s, there began to be something of an opening up about the conversation that people don't think about information in a silo, right. We do this in the context of our lives. We're social beings. We have culture embedded in us in some way. We have different levels of access depending on our education and our economic standpoint. Where we live, and so there needed to be some sort of an examination of how those all come into play, and so the term that started to get applied to that discussion are information practices, and it's not simply a way of recording and documenting what people do. The actual steps, there is that, but it's really a looking at the broad experience of what happens when we engage with information. So, you and I, or many people, we certainly do Google some things, right. We know how to Google. We know how to scroll through our phones. We talk to people to get information, but we make decisions about each of those depending on any number of things. How familiar we are or how comfortable we are. There's also of course information we get that is not quite as tangible, right? So there's a fabulous researcher named Annemaree Lloyd, whose work really kind of inspired me, and Annemaree Lloyd talks about information literacy that comes from the corporal experience: touching and sensing and learning by doing things. And so, you know, in your notes when you said, "let's use our cameras if you can" because that's informative. You can tell. You can look at my face or listen to my voice and see and get a sense of what's going on and make sense of that, and so practices kind of take all those into account as well, and they're very fixed in time, right. Like, this can change tomorrow or a year from now. So, I suppose that's what practices means. They're important because our experience of information is much more complicated than simply, you know, search words.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Right, and I'm interested in how your phrase that too, in terms of what we do with it also, because it's not just—it's how you make the decision to look up the information, how you look up the information, who you're bringing into that decision and then what. It's so much more

comprehensive than it sounds. It sounds very like, “what’s your search string?”, but it’s not. There’s a lot more sociology involved.

Maria Ortiz-Myers

Yeah, exactly.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Your study involved interviewing several sets of parents of transgender children and how they sought out those information practices and what they did in the time that they were learning about their children’s transition. What were the main conclusions that you drew from this study?

Maria Ortiz-Myers

I think the thing that impressed me most about doing this study is how emotional this work was, right. These folks, who were extremely supportive of their kids, but regardless of their age, I think the oldest one was in their 60s and the youngest parent was maybe late 30s, you know, all of them were very engaged with this idea that they wanted to help their kid in whatever way they could. They just had varying levels of comfort with the concept. I’m gonna use one of their terms, new conception of gender, right, and they understood that this was on them. That it was on them as parents to go get that information, even though this whole process, conversation whatever you want to call it started with a declaration from their young person. They took it on themselves to go pursue this information, and that was a very emotional process. So, what they encountered, you know, we make all kinds of important decisions and use that and rely on information to help inform those, but they’re not often very emotional. They don’t strike us in the heart of, if I do this, something bad will happen, or if I don’t do this.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The ramifications of the seeking of the information.

Maria Ortiz-Myers

Exactly. So, that was one of the main takeaways, is that this is a very emotional process, and I don’t feel like we engage with the emotional ramifications of information very much in this field. One of the important takeaways that kind of surprised me was the way the young people really relied on an object, some other way of relaying information that was not verbal, even though all of them said they felt like they had great relationships with their kids, and I believe them because their kids told them, came to them at some point about their gender identity. It was just so fraught that they, many of them, said, “Well the only way I can really give you this information without feeling too much is by writing it down.” So, they created these objects. They were notes, typically text messages, index cards, yeah. I loved it, and also, I didn’t expect so many of them to do it. I mean, it’s a small study, but it was quite a few of them who were

like, “Yup, we relied on communicating information, at least in the beginning, via these objects,” so that was, I think, a pretty important conclusion.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Yeah, I’m really glad you brought it up because that was definitely the part of your paper that emotionally struck me almost. You know, just reading it I could feel that. I could say, oh, you know, I remember being scared to tell your parents something even way less life changing and important and critical than this, and that fear, and that uncertainty about that immediate confrontational conversation when there’s just too much change happening in your head and you don’t know how to verbally respond, and I thought, wow, we should, you know, think about that. I mean, maybe it was just me. I thought, I should really think about that in terms of, like, writing things down. You know, people always say, write it down, it’ll make you feel better. I can’t remember what the name of the child was in the study, but they had written it down. Oh no, they had texted their parents and said, “I’m texting you this, but I’ll tell you when I’m ready to talk about it,” and I thought, what agency does this young person have, to say “I have to say this, I will tell you when I’m ready to discuss it.” I mean, wow, I’m 45 and I don’t know if I’d be able to have that level of, you know, knowing what your boundaries are and being able to articulate that. I was just wowed and really moved.

**Maria Ortiz-Myers**

And that was Tyler. Tyler was in college when he sent that, but you’re absolutely right. College is still very tough. It’s the first time you’re getting space away from your parents, and you’re supposed to be an adult, but you’re not exactly sure how to be an adult, and you’re exactly right, but my youngest, the youngest person Fallon, who I think if I’m remembering correctly was about ten-and-a-half or eleven when they first started this conversation with their parents, they used a note and essentially said the same thing, right. “I’m giving you this note, but there’s a lot here, and I want you to know, but I’m not sure what else to say.” So, yeah, the agency was pretty impressive.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

And I’m also struck by how the picture painted from all of the conversations that you relay in your paper are sort of, you know, you think about things like this, transition and someone, you know, transitioning into a gender, it just being this kind of enormous all-encompassing event where the thing that I took away from your paper and listening to these parents was it felt more like this kind of slow sprinkle. There’s the initial conversation which, like we said, frequently was coming through the printed object or communication somehow, but then it was like this kind of slow gradual back and forth, learning to dance kind of situation, and it was helpful for me to read that because I think thinking about big things in your life, you know they always feel like this ripping off of the band-aid or burning of the bridge behind you, and it’s like, no, there’s steps, and there’s small conversation that happen over and over again that build the library of information, and I was really sort of struck by that, how it wasn’t, there wasn’t a

whole lot of, you know, and granted these are all parents who are supportive of their children, who volunteered for a study, so it's not going to be these volatile situations that we're all so familiar with. I was really taken with, like I said, how it slowly builds upon itself, how it just sort of organically grew.

Maria Ortiz-Myers

I'm glad that you say that because I wasn't sure if that quite came through in retrospect. You write the paper and go, oh, did I say this to make sure that that came through? There's a page limit and a word limit. But you're right, right? So, there was this, I think I am accurate when I say for the parent, this was a major event. This initial discussion and in their minds, this was a big thing to deal with after that on their own, but you're right, there is a progression certainly, especially for the younger ones on, you know, on how they come to know themselves, how their family comes to know them, how they all get used to the idea and then what changes with the next stage of their life, particularly the younger ones. I think it was Jack's parents who, even that mom was a school counselor, and so she, you know, I don't think she was a typical research participant at all. I mean, at least for my purposes, she's not a "normal mom" from that perspective because she knew about things that young people experience, but for her own sake she said, "There's a lot I didn't know, and a lot I wanted to know, but also Jack came out at 14 and there's still the whole stuff with fourteen-year-olds, like they're still fourteen." So, yeah. She was like, "I know we don't have this information yet, but we're not there yet, so when we get there, we'll do the same thing." I think Elise and their daughter had the same sort of conversation and they were a little bit older, maybe about seventeen, sixteen, in that area. So, thank you for saying that. I'm glad that came through.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, and maybe again, just to tie it in, I have an eleven-year-old, and so it's sort of like the conversations I'm having with my eleven-year-old seem like breathtakingly, I'm like, I can't believe I'm talking about these things, this kid is almost a grown-up now and everything feels impossible until it's not, and then you look back in retrospect and it's like, oh, the days are long and the years are short (laughs).

Maria Ortiz-Myers

Exactly.

Mary Alice Yeskey

But, yeah, and it was heartening. I'm glad you said that. Fourteen is fourteen no matter what. It's going to stink no matter what's going on. I wanted to know, in terms of sort of practical implications, sort of broader research or library information science, what does your study and studies like yours, what do they shed light on, and what can they help to change?

Maria Ortiz-Myers

I think this particular population, for this particular population, it sheds light on the gaps that exist in terms of parenting literature, right. I've been in this PhD program now for almost five years and the attitude around gender identity and young people wasn't as severe, I thought, at the beginning when I entered the program as it is right now, so what I'm hoping it communicates is that these are parents who are genuinely interested in helping their kids develop healthy self-esteem and get to a place in their lives where they are comfortable in their own skin and are fully capable productive members of society. That's a goal, right? They're just parents like everybody else. I think it also sheds light on these interactions, right, like part of this whole conversation is that each of these parents took what their kid said seriously. They didn't say, "You're too young. You don't know." They may have thought it, but they didn't say it.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Therein lies the difference.

Maria Ortiz-Myers

Right. They went on and did their research to say: are they too young? Maybe they're not too young, and I think the collaborative work that they do, the kids giving the parents information when they asked for it, when they needed it, sort of working together to get the care that they need. That, I hope, speaks to the fact that young people are capable of expressing their identity quite well, and I am not a doctor or a psychologist. I don't know if these things will change, but I know that for the moment or at least in this period this is what these families seem to need to stay together and work well as a team. In terms of support systems, that's really really important. I think, to answer your question more directly, I think it presents the family as an interesting setting for information research. We don't look at, when we talk about collaborative research most of the time it's on work teams, and that's valuable, but I think once again we get to this idea of simple practices, and a sociological reckoning that the discipline is coming to is that we exist in all of these different planes, and we are all part of a family of some sort, whether it's our family of origin or a family we create, and that these families work together, and how they work together is important, and how they work together is really beneficial. Studying how they work together is very beneficial.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Absolutely, and sort of like the reverse of a rabbit hole. Sort of the spiraling out of that was I was struck by some of the conclusions you were talking about in terms of what you just said: the family as a unit and how information is passed back and forth and how, you know, you had a small sample size but regardless most of the situations in the family unit it was the mother doing the primary labor in the family unit of doing that information seeking, and what does that say, and you know there's just, I could feel my brain doing those little lightning strikes of, "Oh, now that's a whole other study you could do." So, it is really interesting, and also information guarding, you know, in terms of protecting their children and the inverse. Getting the

information for them and also kind of doing the bubble and the mama bear situation and keeping them safe from, you know, from misinformation and from people who seek to harm. There was a lot of mental tangents for me personally reading the paper, so I wanted to say thank you for that.

Maria Ortiz-Myers

You're welcome, and that secure management is something I hope to tease out a little bit more in my dissertation, but we'll see. There's so much there. You know, my problem is that I'm sort of trying to limit the threads that I'm pulling on this next phase, so.

Mary Alice Yeskey

For parents and loved ones of transgender and non-binary youth, do you personally have any recommendations or resources that might be a good first start? Websites or books, resources of that nature?

Maria Ortiz-Myers

Depending on where you are, in terms of how to deal with schools and things like that I really like the Trans Youth Equality website. Trans Youth Equality. The National Center for Transgender Equality is also pretty informative. I mean, those are very oriented towards law and legal sort of stuff. There's Gender Spectrum has a website. They're an organization out on the West Coast. I can't remember if they're California or Seattle, but they have a website with a lot of blogs that pursue all kinds of different topics, and that is very, as a parent, I found that really accessible and kind of comforting. That's a good site.

As a scholar, I have really valued some books that I came across that describe other research studies, but I think that they're written in a very accessible manner as well. That that could be very helpful to other parents. So, Tey Meadow, their book *Transgender Kids* is fantastic. Ann Travers, I think Ann Travers is a Canadian researcher, but the book is available everywhere, their book *The Trans Generation*. That was also really helpful. Diane Ehrensaft, I think I'm saying that correctly, is a psychologist and researcher and she's written two books and the one that I use most in my work was *It Takes a Gender Creative Parent*. I know that she wrote one before that and that's all about the sort of emotional experiences that parents with trans and non-binary kids go through and just really approachable writer, very very helpful. And then, Rachel Brill is another researcher and I think they have been doing, Ehrensaft and Brill have probably been doing this kind of work for quite a while because their books were published in the early 2000s. I might have that wrong but certainly more than a decade ago.

Mary Alice Yeskey

You did mention your dissertation and I wanted to ask for my last question: what are you working on now and what's next for you research wise?

Maria Ortiz-Myers

So, right now, this very moment, I am working on the proposal for my dissertation. So, just as I said, you know, I've identified a theory I believe I want to work with. Amelia Gibson who is at the University of North Carolina published a couple papers a few years ago on information marginalization, right, and the institutional sort of obstacles that present themselves when people are looking for information, and when I first encountered it in the PhD program it seemed like a great contribution that didn't have anything to do with me, and the more I think about it and the more the news comes into my orbit I think, well if there isn't a case of information marginalization among parents with trans kids I can't make a case for anything. So, that's one of the things I'm working on, and I'm going to get ready to recruit more parents and kids. I'd like to talk to, you know, pairs of them because one of the things that happened in this paper was I didn't get the perspective of the young people, and I feel like that's really valuable to capture, and then, you know, once that gets approved, hopefully in the next couple months, doing dissertation research so I can put it out there.

Another thing I wanted to mention before we ended is that most research about Trans kids and their families that I found mostly features white middle-class families. And there are a ton of reasons for that. I have a great dissertation advisor at Rutgers, Kaitlin Costello, who is also the co-author on this paper, and they have really kept pushing me to keep foremost in my mind the question of how we can highlight the role of intersecting identities for these families. Black youth, Latin-A youth, and other young people of color who are also Trans encounter as we know an astonishing amount of violence and discrimination. So clearly not every family has the same challenges. As a discipline, I feel like LIS needs to feature the information practices that these children and families perform because the stakes in terms of their safety, freedom of expression, and healthcare, are really heightened for them. Not just getting information that's appropriate for their needs, but ways of protecting information about themselves, and their privacy. Ann Travers wrote that "families of Trans youth live with incredible precarity". I think when we study and highlight folks that have to struggle with precarity daily, we learn better how our information systems – you know, the books, the devices, the technical platforms, the procedures we use every day – serve some folks better than others. And we can try and fix those. If I do anything at all with my work, that's what I hope to show.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

Excellent. Well, I'm really looking forward to following your research.

**Maria Ortiz-Myers**

Thank you.

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

This paper was really fascinating, and I mean I think just for parents writ large I think it's good reading because it's really, just thinking about those things in terms of information. How you bring it in; how you share it; how you both benefit. Just that collaborative nature, that back and

forth, it left me with a lot of food for thought, so thank you so much for your research and your paper.

[Maria Ortiz-Myers](#)

You're welcome. Thank you. I'm glad that it was meaningful to you in some way.

[Mary Alice Yeskey](#)

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