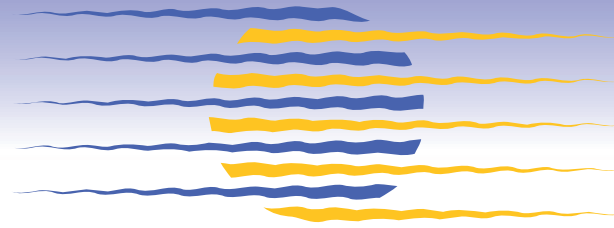


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challenging ideas

Understanding Users: Context, Communication and Construction

Michael Olsson Lecturer, Information and Knowledge Management, University of Technology, Sydney Michael.Olsson@uts.edu.au

Abstract

Understanding information users – people's seeking and use of information - is a question of central importance for effective information practice. This paper challenges information professionals to think about their clients in a different way: to see their behaviour not in terms of isolated incidents of information seeking but as part of an on-going web of social relationships connecting information users, texts, information systems and information professionals to their social and organisational contexts.

The paper challenges several aspects of existing approaches to understanding information behaviour, including: the focus on individual cognition at the expense of social and affective factors; the construction of information users as defined by their areas of ignorance and uncertainty, rather than their expertise; and the focus on purposive rather than non-purposive information behaviour.

Introduction

Understanding information users – people's seeking and use of information - is a question of central importance for effective information practice. The aim of this paper is to provide a critical overview of existing approaches to understanding users' relationship with information and to suggest alternative approaches based both on emerging trends in the literature of information behaviour research and a range of other fields, as well as the author's own research.

The paper challenges several aspects of existing approaches to understanding information behaviour, including: the focus on individual cognition at the expense of social and affective factors; the construction of information users as defined by their areas of ignorance and uncertainty, rather than their expertise; and the focus on purposive rather than non-purposive information behaviour.

In doing so, the paper challenges information professionals to think about their clients in a different way: to see their behaviour not in terms of isolated incidents of information seeking but as part of an on-going web of social relationships connecting information users, texts, information systems and information professionals to their social and organisational contexts.

The article is in two parts. 'Prevailing Approaches' provides a critical analysis of existing approaches to theorising and researching information behaviour, especially those associated with the increasingly dominant cognitivist school. 'Social Approaches to Information Behaviour' describes the emergence of a range of alternative, socially oriented approaches to understanding people's relationship with information, with particular attention to Dervin's Sense-Making and the discourse analytic approach derived from the work of Michel Foucault. The

paper argues that these social constructivist approaches provide a theoretical lens through which information professionals can gain a clearer picture of their clients not as 'needy' individuals to be 'helped', but as social beings, experts in their own life-worlds with whom we need to build a relationship.

Prevailing Approaches

The last two decades have seen a profound change in the way in which information professionals see themselves and their relationship with their clients. Due to the influence of writers such as Wilson (1981) and Dervin & Nilan (1986), they have increasingly come to see themselves not as simply the custodians of information artifacts and systems but as active information facilitators whose role is to assist individuals and organisations in meeting their information needs.

Supporting this 'user-centred' paradigm shift, the same period has seen a plethora of studies examining the information needs, seeking and use of various professional, organizational and cultural groups. While a number of critics, including Wilson (1994) and Julien (1996), have noted the essentially atheoretical nature of much of this research, this period has also seen, as noted by Belkin (1990), Hewins (1990) and Pettigrew et al (2001), the growing influence of cognitive theories of information needs, seeking and use.

Cognitivist information behaviour researchers have addressed a wide range of questions and adopted a variety of methodological approaches. Shared by all of them, however, is a common object of research: the knowledge structures of individuals (e.g. Brookes, 1980; Belkin, 1990; Ingwersen, 1992). Thus if, as Capurro (1992) and Talja (1997) have suggested, the central object of the cognitivist approach is not information but man, then the cognitivist

conception of “information man” (Talja, 1997, 67) is one grounded in a focus on internal cognition rather than external behaviour.

The influence of cognitive theory has had a powerful transformative effect, not only on information research, but also professional practice across a range of fields. The view of information as an ‘object’ to be transferred – and of information practice as the design and management of ‘information delivery systems’ – is one that has increasingly been challenged by models that emphasise the constructive nature of users’ interactions with information.

Yet as with any interpretive framework, cognitive theory brings with it weaknesses as well as strengths. This paper, drawing on the works of a range of critics including Frohmann (1992), Talja (1997), Julien (1999) and Pettigrew et al (2001), as well as my own research (Olsson, 2003), questions some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning cognitive approaches, and argues that they fail to consider some important features of the relationship between people and information. It argues that only by addressing these weaknesses and developing new research strategies and theoretical frameworks which focus attention on the social processes and relationships which underpin users’ information behaviour can we hope to develop a truly holistic understanding. It is only through an understanding of people not simply as isolated intellects or rational decision makers, but as social beings intimately connected to their life-world, that we can hope to develop truly effective, genuinely user-centred, information products and services.

Focus on the Individual

Critics such as Talja (1997) and Pettigrew et al (2001) argued that in focussing on the individual, the cognitivist approach neglects the role of social context in shaping an individual’s information behaviour and that it is therefore “a research approach that omits the fundamentally social nature of all knowing” (Talja, 1997, 70). Pettigrew et al (2001) pointed out that:

The work of information behaviour researchers identified with the cognitive approach has therefore focussed on explaining variations in information behaviour according to characteristics or attributes of the individual and the processes in which the individual is involved ...These attempts have resulted in models of the information-seeking process that are context-independent.

(Pettigrew et al, 2001, 53-54)

Similarly, Frohmann (1992) and Talja (1997) argued that in considering individuals’ mental states/knowledge structures as an object of research separate from their social context, cognitivist researchers perpetuate a mind-body dichotomy central to Western philosophical discourse since Plato. Frohmann argued that most cognitive research adopted a positivist epistemological standpoint. This led, he argued, to a construction of the relationship between thought and the material world derived from the principles of Cartesian dualism – that approaches such as Brookes’ (1980) ‘Three Worlds’ theory lead to a reification of both “stable and objective ‘knowledge structures’” and “an objective reality, with truths waiting to be discovered” (1992, 370). Thus, he argued, the cognitive paradigm constitutes information behaviour as “the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of ‘information’ as given, natural-scientific, cognitive events taking place within radically individualised ‘information processing devices’”(1992, 381).

Frohmann (1992) argued that such a model, based on notions of objective reality and individual subjectivity, offers no theoretical framework for considering complex social relations between people and information, such as the political manipulation of truth. Using the example of a piece of Reagan-era anti-Soviet propaganda, he pointed out that the cognitivist approach offers no conceptual mechanism for considering the nature and implications of such manipulation/fabrication as an information process.

Talja (1997) has questioned the fundamental methodological basis of cognitive research – the question of whether a researcher can ever access another person’s knowledge structures. She argued that cognitivist research is built on a conceit:

...that we have direct and unmediated access to the individual’s mind ...Speech is understood as the unmediated expression of the individual’s original thoughts and experiences ...The individual’s thinking is seen in Platonic terms: as pre-linguistic, immaterial ideas which can for communication purposes, as if in afterthought, be attached onto the signs of language.
(Talja, 1997, 70)

Talja questioned the validity of this approach, arguing that speech of all kinds (including in a research context) is an essentially social process, since language itself is a social construct:

...there are no immaterial concepts, categories or ideas ...Communication would hardly be possible without a common frame of comprehension and negotiation. No concepts thoughts or meanings can exist outside language
(Talja, 1997, 71)

What cognitivist research methods produce therefore are representations not of the participants’ cognitive structures but of the social interaction between researcher and participant. She argued, in consequence, that cognitive internally-oriented approaches to information behaviour research are fundamentally flawed, as the researcher can never directly access the central object of their theoretical approach: the participants’ knowledge structures.

‘Needy’ Information Users

Dervin and Nilan argued that ‘information need’ was one of the “two central concepts of information needs and uses research” (1986, 17). Pettigrew et al (2001, 47) have highlighted the central role of constructions of information need for cognitive information behaviour researchers. Belkin (1990), for example, argued that information seeking behaviour is driven by a person’s recognition of an Anomalous State of Knowledge (ASK) – that their existing knowledge structures are no longer adequate to resolve their current problem-state. Other influential models of information behaviour to position information need and uncertainty as central concepts include: Krikelas (1983), Ingwersen (1992), Kuhlthau (1993) and Wilson (1997). A recent major study by Wilson et al (1999), ‘Uncertainty in Information Seeking’, is perhaps emblematic of the central role that constructions of information need and uncertainty have for contemporary information behaviour research.

Frohmann (1992), Talja (1997) and Julien (1999) have all critiqued this focus on information need as the primary instigator of information behaviour. They pointed out that this has led to a construction of the user in which “[t]heir ignorance ... rather than their knowledge” (Frohmann, 1992, 379) is their defining

characteristic. Similarly Julien (1999) pointed out that prevailing approaches “conceive of users of information systems as ‘children’ or ‘patients’ whose symptoms require diagnosis” (1999, 586). She further pointed out the inequity of the implicit power relations embedded in this construction:

When we construct our positions as experts and our clients’ positions as novices who require help, we set up an unequal power relationship. In Western societies, accepting help has connotations for the recipient of “inferiority, dependency, and inadequacy...” (Julien, 1999, 586)

Talja (1997) argued that information users might, with at least equal validity, be defined not by their lack of knowledge in relation to a given problem situation – as “uncertain people who need help” - but rather as “knowing subjects, as cultural experts” (1997, 77).

Purposive Seeking and Affective Factors

Talja (1997) and Julien (1999) have argued that this focus on information need/cognitive gaps has led to an effective limitation on the types of information behaviour that researchers in the field examine. Wilson has pointed out that ‘information searching’ is but one aspect of ‘information seeking’, which is itself but one aspect of ‘information behaviour’ (2000, 49). However, Talja (1997) argued that, due to cognitivist influences, it has “been natural in the context of information seeking research to focus on information needs arising from problem situations” (Talja, 1997, 77). This focus on information behaviour as a problem-solving strategy has, she argued, led to information behaviour research focussing almost exclusively on purposive information seeking.

Julien (1999) argued that the dominance of constructions of information behaviour as being about rational problem-solving has had a number of effects on the nature of research in the field. She argued that it has led, for example, to information behaviour researchers failing to consider affective aspects of information behaviour:

We typically construct ‘users’ as bungling fools whose affective responses are at best only an annoying interference with effective application of cognitive skills to information retrieval but which, at worst, are the primary barriers to information retrieval. (Julien, 1999, 586)

She argued that “affective and rational behaviour cannot be polarized” (1999, 588), suggesting that “people’s insistence on human information sources in many contexts” (1999, 590), as shown by the work of researchers such as Price (1963), Poston-Anderson & Edwards (1993) and Harris (1988), “is a direct result of people’s need for social interaction: the need to establish, develop and maintain social relationships” (1999, 588).

This focus on rationalist approaches may also account for the field’s on-going research focus on users’ interactions with formal information sources and systems. This, Julien argued, calls into question the depth of the field’s commitment to a user-centred paradigm: “[w]e claim that we have considered the user and her needs apart from information systems or services” (1999, 586), but an examination of prevailing research approaches suggests that much research remains “ultimately systems-centred” (1999, 586).

Social Approaches to Information Behaviour

A growing awareness of the limitations of prevailing cognitive ‘internal approaches’ to the study of information behaviour may account for the fact that

Approaches to studying information behaviour that focus on social context emerged slowly during the early 1990s and are becoming more prominent. ...social approaches were developed to address information behaviour phenomena that lie outside the realm of cognitive frameworks.

(Pettigrew et al. 2001, 54).

These social approaches to the study of information behaviour have included phenomenological and phenomenographic work by e.g. Wilson (1997; 2003) and Limberg (1999); and social network analysis research as undertaken by e.g. Haythornthwaite (1996), Williamson (1998) and Sonnenwald (1999).

Further, the last decade has seen the emergence of social constructivist approaches to information behaviour research, including Chatman’s ‘life in a small world’ and ‘life in the round’ (1991; 1996; 1999); the more recent developments of Dervin’s Sense-Making (1999); Savolainen’s (1995) use of Bourdieu’s ‘Mastery of Life’ and the discourse analytic work of Talja (1997; 2001) and Tuominen & Savolainen (1997). These approaches consider social context not only as a factor influencing the individual information user’s cognitive processes but as the primary focus of theoretical attention.

Yet these researchers were not the first to consider the social context of knowledge creation and dissemination. Nor can the ‘social turn’ in information behaviour research be understood in isolation from developments in other areas in the social sciences. Theories about the social construction of information and knowledge can be found in a variety of fields, including philosophy, sociology and social anthropology. My own research, for example, has been influenced by the work of theorists and researchers such as de Solla Price (1963), Knorr-Cetina & Mulkay (1983) and especially Dervin (1992; 1999) and Foucault (1970, 1972; 1978; 1980), whose work also examines the social processes of information behaviour.

Social Constructivism

Savolainen has noted that “Western social science has experienced a shift from methodological collectivism (or holism) and individualism to methodological situationalism” (1993, 23). Over the last three decades, the influence of theorists and philosophers such as Schutz (1972), Berger & Luckman (1967) and Foucault (1970, 1972; 1978; 1980), as well as the empirical work of social anthropologists and sociologists such as Bourdieu (1977), Knorr-Cetina (1983) and Mulkay (1991), have led to the emergence of a range of social constructivist approaches to research in the social sciences.

Cognitivist approaches such as Belkin’s (1990) or Ingwersen’s (1992) tend to objectify social context, regarding it as ‘separate’ from the cognitive processes that are the central object of their research. By contrast, social constructivism considers “context interpretively and holistically and consider[s] it as a “carrier of meaning”” (Pettigrew et al, 2001, 54).

Although as yet a relatively uncommon approach to the study of information behaviour, social constructivism has been noted by Vakkari (1997) as an important emerging trend. The present study follows works such as Savolainen (1995), Tuominen (1997)

and Talja (1997; 2001) in seeking to develop new ways to study information behaviour from a social constructivist perspective.

Social constructivism has been described as part of the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences (Talja, 1997). The nature of language as a social construct, and its central importance for individuals' sense-making, is a key feature of the social constructivist approach:

By social constructionism I understand that people live in a common reality which they largely share with the help of language. Language provides people with vocabularies, i.e. concepts and categories for use in different situations. This vocabulary varies according to the discourses they are participating in. By using the vocabulary people construct meaning or make sense in their lives. (Vakkari, 1997, 456)

Hjørland & Albrechtsen (1995) point out that findings in social psychology about the fundamental role of language in an individual's cognitive processes have had a strong influence on social constructivist theory. The link between the two, a social constructivist would argue, means that even our most apparently individual decision-making processes are, on one level, social constructs.

Social constructivist approaches explicitly reject Brookes' (1980) Popperian 'three worlds' model. They reject the positivist notion of objective knowledge as a representation of an objective reality, as well as the Cartesian separation of the physical and mental spheres (Frohmann, 1992). While sharing with cognitive approaches a view of information behaviour as a constructive process, they argue that both information artefacts and individual's sense-making processes should be seen, not in terms of an objective/subjective divide, but rather as 'intersubjective':

Our experience of the world, upon which our thoughts about the world are based, is intersubjective because we experience the world with and through others. Whatever meaning we create has its roots in human action, and the totality of social artifacts and cultural objects is grounded in human activity. (Wilson, 2003, 71)

Sense-Making

Like cognitivism, the Sense-Making approach has been considered by many observers (e.g. Belkin, 1990; Frohmann, 1992) as an essentially 'internal' approach, concerned with the cognitive processes of individual information seekers. Dervin herself (1999) has noted that this individually-focussed construction of Sense-Making has been the most common one amongst information researchers adopting the methodology.

Yet in his analysis, Savolainen highlighted the fact that many aspects of Sense-Making, such as "communication-as-procedure" (Savolainen, 1993, 20), have much in common with the socially-oriented approaches of sociologists such as Knorr-Cetina (1983). Epistemologically, Sense-Making "takes a clear constructivist stance" (Savolainen, 1993, 18) in overt opposition to "traditional positivistic research" (1993, 19). However, this does not mean that Sense-Making embraces the other philosophic extreme – existentialist individualism. The Sense-Making approach acknowledges that social "across time-space characterizations of human beings (e.g. culture, demography, structural routine)" (Dervin 1999, 731) may play an important role in shaping the sense-making processes of individuals.

In her more recent writings (e.g. Dervin, 1999), Dervin has sought to challenge the construction of Sense-Making as a theory solely concerned with individual problem-solving. If not a re-invention, this later work certainly places renewed emphasis on the social/collective aspects of Sense-Making.

Talja (1997) took Savolainen's point further, arguing that:

Its [Sense-Making's] epistemological and ontological basis closely corresponds to that of the discourse analytic viewpoint. Language is seen as the primary shaper of observations and interpretations of the world (see Dervin, 1991, 46-7; Dervin et al, 1992, 7). Information is about what people do with language and what language does to people. (Talja, 1997, 71)

The increasing focus in Dervin's later work on the central role of power in people's sense-making increases the similarity between the two approaches:

Sense-Making ...assumes information to be an in-flux creation of a power structure always subject to the forces of power both for its maintenance and its resistance and change. (Dervin, 1999, 741)

In this construction, Sense-Making is very similar to Foucault's theory of the discursive construction of knowledge/power.

Central to the Sense-Making approach is a construction of the human subject as:

...embodied in materiality and soaring across time-space ...a body-mind-heart-spirit living in time-space, moving from a past, in a present, to a future, anchored in material conditions; yet at the same time with an assumed capacity to sense-make abstractions, dreams, memories, plans, ambitions, fantasies, stories pretences that can both transcend time space and last beyond specific moments of time space. (Dervin, 1999, 730)

An important point of difference between Sense-Making and most cognitivist approaches is that it explicitly "mandates positing as possible fodder for sense-making not only thoughts and ideas, observations and understandings, but emotions and feelings, dreams and visions, pretences and illusions, connections and disconnections" (1999, 730). In Sense-Making, "Emoting ...usually marginalized as a non-useful strategy for sense-making takes equal footing along with factizing" (Dervin, 1999, 732). It therefore offers a more holistic approach to examining information behaviour, one which might address Julien's critique of existing approaches' failure to consider affective factors.

Furthermore, in relation to Talja (1997) and Julien's (1999) critiques of prevailing constructions of the user, Sense-Making constructs the actor as:

...an expert in her world (e.g. in her body, her work, her life) ...Sense-Making assumes the actor as theorist of her world, with hunches, hypotheses, and generalizations about how things connect to things and how power flows. (Dervin, 1999, 740)

One of the most important, albeit most challenging, aspects of Sense-Making is its nature as a 'verbing' approach. That is, it directs theoretical attention towards the processes of sense-

making and unmaking, rather than at either the individual information user or the products (physical or cognitive) of the sense-making process:

Sense-Making refocuses attention from the transcendent individual or collective human unit to the verbing. It is by focussing attention on practices rather than persons that Sense-Making's mandated attention to time, space, movement, gap are systematically addressed. ...Instead of focussing on elusive, ever-changing and constantly challenged nouns, Sense-Making mandates a focus on the hows of human individual and collective sense-making and sense-unmaking, on the varieties of internal and external cognizings, emotings, feelings, and communicatings that make, reinforce, challenge, resist, alter and reinvent human worlds.

(Dervin, 1999, 731)

In focussing on verbing/process, Sense-Making does not seek to deny the potential validity of or the existence of knowledge structures that transcend individual interpretation. Rather:

Institutional (societal, cultural, economic) structures form a general framework or a manoeuvring space for individual actors producing and reproducing (energizing) those structures. Hence structures are virtual by nature; they exist only in the process of their continuous production and reproduction. A social structure that is not re-energized regularly with acts of communication dies; it simply does not exist.

(Savolainen, 1993, 20)

Savolainen suggested that Dervin derived this approach from "the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens" (Savolainen, 1993, 20). However, it also strongly parallels Foucault's theory of discourse and knowledge/power.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Discourse analytic approaches have become a strong feature of research in the social sciences over the last two decades (Mulkay, 1991). From their origins in linguistics (e.g. Saussure, 1974), such approaches can now be found in such fields as social psychology, sociology, history, literary criticism, education, communication and, increasingly, information studies. Discourse analytic approaches derived from the work of the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1970, 1972; 1978; 1980) have been highly influential across a broad range of disciplines, from history and sociology to gender studies and literary criticism. Although information studies has been slower to adopt Foucault's theories and approaches than many other social sciences, his theory of the discursive construction of knowledge/power has informed the theoretical approach of a number of recent information behaviour studies, including Tuominen (1997), Talja (2001), and the author's own (Olsson, 2003).

Foucauldian discourse analysis can be seen as part of the 'linguistic turn' that is a feature of many social constructivist theories. However, discourse analysis in Foucault's work was not focussed in the linguistic analysis of conversations, but rather on the social construction of the specialised language of groups (discourse communities). Although 'discourse' has been broadly equated with the concept of a discipline (McHoul & Grace, 1993), its application has not been solely confined to scholarly fields. Foucault's theories have also been successfully applied to the study of a wide range of professional fields, such as accountancy

(Fuller, 1993), and even leisure pursuits, such as music (Talja, 2001).

Discourses do not necessarily equate with common institutional 'labels' or 'boundaries', such as 'economics' or 'medieval history'. While some academic or professional disciplines may be dominated at a given time by a particular discourse, others may include a number of distinct discourses e.g. Frohmann (1994) argued that information science 'talk' was made up of a number of competing discourses.

In the Foucauldian conception, discourse is seen as a complex network of relationships between individuals, texts, ideas and institutions, with each 'node' impacting, to varying degrees, on other nodes, and on the dynamics of the discourse as a whole. While discourse can all too easily be conceptualised as an abstract, theoretical construction, Foucault emphasised that any discourse is inextricably tied to its particular socio-historical context and cannot be studied or understood if divorced from this context: "For Foucault there is ... no universal understanding that is beyond history and society" (Rabinow, 1984, 4).

Foucault argues that a discourse community will not accept that a given statement is true in a random or ad hoc way. Rather, its members will have a set of conventions or 'discursive rules' - either formal or implicit, but widely recognized within the community - by which a 'truth statement' can be evaluated and validated or repudiated. These 'discursive rules' shape not only the form that a valid truth statement can take in that discourse but also, more fundamentally, they dictate what can be said in the context of that discourse.

This conceptual framework has important implications for information behaviour research. It constructs social context, and established social practices in particular, as central to understanding a person's sense-making processes. For example, a researcher will not regard the results of a qualitative research study as 'good' if the rules of his/her particular discourse regard qualitative data as 'imprecise'. Equally, an information user can only evaluate a concept - whether it be the theory of relativity, anomalous states of knowledge or the off-side rule in soccer - if there is an existing discursive context for discussing such concepts with which they are familiar.

In the discourse analytic approach then, knowledge/truth is neither based on a perceived correspondence with an 'objective' reality, as in positivist approaches, nor is it wholly subjective, as in existentialist philosophy. Rather, it is intersubjective - a product of the shared meanings, conventions and social practices operating within and between discourses, and to which an individual's sense-making processes are inextricably linked.

A related concept is that of the 'archive' (Foucault, 1972). Foucault emphasises that members of a discourse community are connected not only by a shared engagement with a collection of texts, but also by a set of interpretations of these texts that the members of the community share. The set of common 'truth statements' held by a particular discourse community are known as the 'archive'. For example, Kuhn's work on paradigms is interpreted differently by, and has had a different influence in, the discourses of information science from those of the history of science. A single text, the Bible being a useful example, may have hundreds of different 'identities' for different discourse communities, each of them legitimate in the context of their own point in space and time.

Dervin (1989; 1999) and Frohmann (1992) have both criticised existing information behaviour research for largely ignoring issues of power and power relations. Foucault, by contrast, constructs the relationship between knowledge and power as central to his conceptual framework. Indeed, he constructs knowledge and power not as separate entities but as conjoined products of the same social processes - knowledge/power (*pouvoir/savoir*):

We should admit ... that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

(Foucault, 1977, 27)

In the discourse analytic approach, discourses are never static. Rather, the ongoing relations between people, institutions and texts generate regimes of both meaning and authority (knowledge/power) simultaneously. In this view, the creation and dissemination of 'texts', the 'weighting' of one 'text' more than another, involves a series of dynamic power relations. These relations are constantly re-inventing and re-affirming themselves through the process of applying the discursive rules to examine new 'texts' and to re-examine existing ones:

There is a battle 'for truth' or at least 'around truth' - it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted' but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true.

(Foucault, in Rabinow (ed.), 1984, 418).

Thus, in contrast to earlier Marxian models which construct power as something to be 'held' and 'imposed', Foucault constructs knowledge/power as the product of an inductive process:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere ... Power comes from below; that is there is no binary and all encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled at the root of power relations ... no such duality extending from the top down...

(Foucault, 1979, 93-94)

If a discourse community holds a given statement to be 'true', this acceptance imbues it with a certain power in the context of that discourse. This power will also, to a degree, flow on to the author as an 'authoritative speaker'. Looking at information in terms of power relations is something we all do in everyday speech, when we say that a book or article is 'authoritative', or that a particular university has a 'strong reputation' in a particular field.

Death of the Author

The Foucauldian discourse analytic approach also calls for a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between the author, the text and the reader. Foucault, in his essay 'What is an Author?' (in Rabinow, 1984, 101-120), echoes Barthes (1988) in talking of the "death of the author" – a phrase that has become a standard slogan of post-modernism.

In the information transfer model, authors, texts and readers are constructed as separate entities. Texts are the vehicles by which 'chunks' of information are transferred from the author to

the reader. In this model, authors are seen as the creators of information, and readers as passive recipients.

Discourse analysis argues instead that readers, individually and collectively, are actively involved in the construction of meaning: that meaning-making is a complex socio-linguistic process involving the reader, the text and their social context. This has strong implications for the construction of the relationship between authors, texts and readers:

So why does Foucault say the author is "dead"? It's his way of saying that the author is decentered, shown to be only a part of the structure, a subject position, and not the center. In the humanist view, ... authors were the source and origin of texts ... and were also thus beyond texts - hence authors were "centers." ... By declaring the death of the author, Foucault is "deconstructing" the idea that the author is the origin of something original, and replacing it with the idea that the "author" is the product or function of writing, of the text.

(Klages, 1986)

This theory then has two key features: firstly, that the meaning ('knowledge', 'truth') of a work is not something governed or determined by the author, but rather is a social construct created (and constantly re-created) by the reader/s at a particular point in space and time; secondly, authors, as the originators of a body of work, are themselves the products of social construction within and between discourses.

In this conception, published texts have no single absolute meaning or truth, but only a socially constructed and located 'truth' or 'truths'. Nor is this 'truth' something that can be predetermined by the author. Rather, the established social practices and conventions within a community and the interactions of its members determine the meaning, significance, and authority of a work in the context of that particular community. This means that the meaning/knowledge-claims/truth of any work are constantly being questioned, re-examined and re-interpreted. For example, each time a member of a research community evaluates, critiques, cites, or re-interprets a work, or draws parallels between one work and another in his/her own publications, teaching or research practices, they are contributing to the on-going interpretation of the work's meaning.

Nor need the meaning that a community draws from a work necessarily have any relation to the author's original intended meaning – hence 'death of the author'. Rather, the meaning/significance of a work is determined by a particular community (which may or may not include the author) and will reflect the concerns, beliefs and socio-political context of that community. Thus works may be seen as having many different meanings and containing widely different 'truths' by different communities, and this process can continue for centuries, even millennia, after the death of the author e.g. the ongoing use of the works of Aristotle or Sun Tzu in contemporary fields as diverse as philosophy, strategic studies and marketing.

An extreme example of the potential divergence between authorial intent and modern interpretation would be the 1850 photographic study of African-born slaves in the American South by Louis Agassiz. Agassiz's intent was to demonstrate that Africans were a separate, less 'evolved' species than whites, an absurd and repugnant theory to most modern sensibilities. Nonetheless, modern anthropologists and historians of slavery

and the cultural origins of African Americans find his study an invaluable resource (Ward, 1992).

Similarly, just as a community may be divorced in time from a work's original author, communities may re-interpret works from other disciplines to suit their own interests and concerns. A good example of this in the context of contemporary information science is the work of Kuhn. Kuhn is quite widely cited in the literature of information science, generally as the originator of the notion of 'paradigm'. Yet the way in which 'paradigm' is used/constructed by information scientists differs quite markedly from that of Kuhn himself. Indeed, its use by Dervin and others to describe information science directly contradicts Kuhn's proscription that paradigms occur only in the 'hard' sciences, the social sciences being "innately pre-paradigmatic" (Kuhn, 1970). An author-centric approach would lead us to regard such use of Kuhn's work as 'wrong'; the discourse analytic perspective would see this as the inevitable consequence of a community re-interpreting Kuhn's work in the context of their own interests and concerns.

This is also a good example of how the dynamics of communities can lead to the social construction not only of individual works, but also of authors themselves. In the context of a particular discourse, an author is not primarily a living, breathing human being (after all, they may be long dead) but rather a social construct derived from the community's interpretation of the significance (truth) of their body of work. Thus Kuhn as an author-construct in information science may well be a very different figure, with a very different significance, from Kuhn as an author-construct in the sociology of knowledge or the history of science. Thus Small's (1978) notion of documents as 'standard symbols' might usefully be extended to include author-constructs as well, with certain authors coming to represent/symbolise particular ideas/theories/standpoints in the eyes of a particular community or communities.

Since, in the Foucauldian framework, knowledge and power are inextricably linked (the one automatically generates the other), one needs to consider the role of the power and influence that become attached to author-constructs by particular communities, and the impact of this power upon the behaviours/perceptions of members of that community. Author-constructs can therefore act as 'Dead Germans' for a community (icons of the core 'truths' of a discourse) or, as the contextual terrain shifts, as 'Dead White Males' (symbols of what is 'wrong' with the established order – the focus of resistance).

Conclusions

Social constructivist frameworks, such as Sense-Making and Foucauldian discourse analysis, offer a theoretical framework which allows information professionals to think about their clients in a different way: to see their behaviour not in terms of isolated incidents of information seeking but as part of an on-going web of social relationships connecting information users, texts, information systems and information professionals to their social and organisational contexts.

Implications of Research

The ways in which this new theoretical 'lens' can allow information researchers and professionals to see users in a different light can be seen, for example, in my own recently completed doctoral research (Olsson, 2003). This study examined the social processes that influence the construction by 15 international academic (information behaviour) researchers of the meaning/s and significance/s of an

author and her work prominent in the literature of their field (Brenda Dervin). Its findings both built on and challenged existing theoretical constructions of information behaviour.

The findings demonstrated that participants' constructions of the meaning/s and significance/s of the author and her work were highly contextualised. In examining the constructions conveyed to them, participants did not simply ask 'What does this mean?' or even 'What does this mean for me?' Rather, they asked 'What does this mean for me in terms of my understanding of and engagement with my field? My specialisation/s and particular research interests? My philosophical and conceptual frameworks? My current projects, current teaching?'

Further, participants' analysis of the meanings conveyed to them involved more than determining their aboutness; an integral part of their constructive processes was assessing the credibility of the informants' messages. This determination of the message's *authority* formed the basis of participants' decisions to either accept or contest the meanings they conveyed. Participants' accounts showed that they were very adept at making such meaning/authority judgments - to give detailed explanations of both their assessments of the knowledge claims of their informants and of the meaning and significance of the author and her work. Their abilities were very much consistent with Talja's conceptualisation of "users as knowing subjects, as cultural experts" (1997, 77).

The study found that participants' constructions of the author and her work drew on a complex array of existing knowledge/power structures, derived not only from information science, but a range of other disciplines. Whether accepting or rejecting an interpretation conveyed to them, it was important for participants to relate their constructions to the views of established authorities. This allowed them to 'justify' their own constructions, both to themselves and other members of the academic community.

In addition, the research raised serious questions about the validity of several aspects of existing constructions of information behaviour. In particular, very little of the behaviour participants described fit with existing models (e.g. Belkin, 1990; Wilson, 1997) which see information behaviour as being driven by user's desire to fulfil recognised information needs. Only four of the study's 15 participants reported that any of the significant events in their relationship with the author and her work involved active information seeking on their part. Instead, participants' interactions were far more likely to arise from conversations with their colleagues or academic mentors, their attendance at a conference or workshop, or other social activities associated with their role as an information behaviour researcher.

In addition, the picture of information behaviour to emerge from the study was not one of atomistic behaviour leading to the resolution of discrete information problems. Participants' significant relationships were with people and texts (including the author and her work) they had long-term relationships with. In describing the significance of such long-term relationships and engagements, it was notable that participants talked not simply of individual events or encounters, but rather of the cumulative and inter-related nature of their relationship with familiar people and texts. Each individual encounter both drew on and elaborated participants' existing constructions of their informant.

Implications for Professional Practice

Julien (1996) has noted that studies of the information needs and behaviour of groups (academic, professional, demographic)

are particularly prevalent in the professional literature, and are increasingly undertaken by information professionals, rather than academic researchers. Critics, however, have been united in describing the majority of such research as essentially descriptive and atheoretical (Wilson, 1994; Julien, 1996).

The discourse analytic approach offers information professionals a powerful tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of the client communities they work with. It allows them to see them, not as isolated 'needy' individuals but as dynamic members of a community. In this way, the discourse analytic approach offers user studies a new found theoretical legitimacy – it offers a conceptual framework which explicitly links the construction of the group studied to their information behaviours and constructive processes.

Similarly, the study's conceptual approach, and the inter-relationship between the construction of meaning and authority in particular, has implications for the design of information services and systems. Tripp & Bichelmeyer (1990) have suggested that one of the key barriers to effective information design is lack of an informed understanding of how users construct information. Nilan & Pannen (1989) noted that the design of most classification and indexing schemes for information retrieval systems continue to be grounded in the notion of texts having a single fixed meaning. This paper would argue that such objectivist approaches to system design need to be critically re-evaluated. Discourse Analysis offers an alternative conception of knowledge as inter-subjective – its meaning not fixed but negotiated through the conventions and social practices operating within discourse communities. This suggests that information designers need to employ design strategies that allow access to texts in ways appropriate to the shared knowledge structures and social practices operating within the various communities they seek to serve.

The discourse analytic approach argues that information professionals need to think about their clients' information behaviour not simply in terms of meaning-making or cognitive gap-filling. Rather they need to consider that people's sense-making processes occur in the context of existing networks of power relations. Thus, future information systems might greatly increase their utility if their designers develop an understanding of the structures of authority operating within these communities. Designers need to develop an understanding of authority, like meaning, as not fixed but relative – a social construct. Effective information systems should, for example, consider such issues as whether a single or multiple structures of meaning/authority operate within a given community.

One finding of my own research (Olsson, 2003) with important implications for information practice relates to the important influence of participants' previous experience (their existing constructions) on their behaviour and constructive processes. This suggests that information professionals might, for example, consider strategies for profiling their clients' backgrounds and experience, in order to gain a greater understanding of their needs, expectations and behaviours.

Social constructivist theory also challenges information professionals to consider the power relations that underpin their own role. Do existing services or interactions with clients implicitly cast them as "incompetent half-wits" (Julien, 1999, 586)? Do libraries operate in a "discourse of fear" (Radford & Radford, 2001, 299)? Are information professionals viewed as

knowledgeable 'insiders' by the communities they work with or as marginalized 'outsiders' (Chatman, 1999)?

Although emerging as a significant trend among academic information researchers, social approaches to understanding information users have not yet become widespread among information professionals. It is my hope that providing this brief overview at a major conference for information professionals may lead some in the professional community to explore the implications of the approach in the context of their own organisational context and their own professional practice. After all, one of the key messages of social constructivist theory is that there are no 'teleologies' – no universal 'band-aid' solutions. The aim of this paper has therefore not been to tell information professionals what to do, but rather to provide an alternative approach to finding their own solutions.

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