

# Role of Information Behaviour in Research

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**Abstract:** *"Information behavior" is the currently preferred term used to describe the many ways in which human beings interact with information, in particular, the ways in which people seek and utilize information. The broad history of research on information seeking behavior over the last 50-60 years is reviewed, major landmarks are identified, and current directions in research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Information seeking Information use Information needs Information genres Online catalogs Online searching Digital libraries Library use.

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Information behavior" is the currently preferred term used to describe the many ways in which human beings interact with information, in particular, the ways in which people seek and utilize information. Information behavior is also the term of art used in library and information science to refer to a sub-discipline that engages in a wide range of types of research conducted in order to understand the human relationship to information.

Interest in this area developed out of several streams. Librarians wanted to understand library users better, government agencies wanted to understand how scientists and engineers used technical information in order to promote more rapid uptake of new research results, and social scientists generally were interested in the social uses of information in a variety of senses. In more recent years, social studies of information technology and social informatics have contributed to this area as well. Within library and information science, these various streams of research are drawn on for what they can contribute to a richer understanding of information behavior.

### 1.1 Information

What, then, is information? Here, rather than review the many senses in which this term has been interpreted in the field, we will rely on a sense of the term that is an extended understanding of the concept as used in general conversation. We all recognize that people search for information on, say, the history of a small town, the population of Turkey, or how to do foreign exchange trading online. All these examples make a reasonable match with the generally understood sense of information as being factual, statistical, and/or procedural.

"Information," however, is used in a broader sense as well in the world of information behavior research. The term is generally assumed to cover all instances where people interact with their environment in any such way that leaves some impression on them—that is, adds or changes their knowledge store. These impressions can include the emotional changes that result from reading a novel, or learning that one's friend is ill. These changes can also reflect complex interactions where information combines with pre-existing knowledge to make new understandings, or enables the individual to deduce or induce new thoughts and ideas. As the Hans Christian Andersen tale suggested, the ugly duckling did not realize that he was a swan until he came in contact with swans, saw his reflection in water, and figured out that he was himself a swan, too. These information interactions can also leave a negative impact – one may ignore, deny, or reject information. (See also an excellent early analysis of relations to information by Atkin. One may also simply discover that nothing has changed – the university admissions letter still hasn't come in the mail. This negative news is, of course, informative in its own way, just as a person who has ignored information has often, in some way or other, nonetheless absorbed it. In fact, probably the largest amount of all information taken in by human beings is that received passively – simply through being aware that is absorbed in the context of daily living.

### 1.2 History of Information Behavior Research

From the earliest days, librarianship in the United States had a commitment to care about and serve the users of libraries. In the founding year of American professional librarianship, 1876, Samuel Green wrote to encourage librarians to "mingle

freely" with the library's users "and help them in every way." In the mid-twentieth century, the great Indian librarian, S.R. Ranganathan, promulgated his Five Laws of Librarianship, which were very much oriented to the library user:

1. Books are for use
2. Every reader, his book
3. Every book its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. The library is a growing organism<sup>(7)</sup>

However, for many decades that commitment remained largely on the plane of values and had little other than anecdotal data upon which to develop library services.

### **1.3 Information Searching vs. Information Seeking**

The above discussion addressed research on how people interact with information, how and when they seek information, and what uses they make of it. But it should be understood that throughout this period of time a parallel body of research and practical application was continuing that addressed the specifics of *the act of searching itself*. That is, in working with paper and online resources, many problems were encountered and skills needed to succeed in the specific acts associated with locating information in a paper or online resource. Bates' articles on information searching tactics and search techniques <sup>(79)</sup> <sup>(80)</sup> promoted greater attention to the complexities of identifying sources and working one's way through resources to locate the desired information. A long line of research followed that addressed both search success and desirable design features in information systems to promote ease of use.

### **1.4 Role of Technology in Information Behavior Research**

In order to simplify the narrative line, the above discussion made little mention of the role of technology in information seeking and research on information seeking. But, in fact, the extraordinary changes in information technology (IT) over the last 50-60 years have meant that a great deal of information behavior research has also been concerned with impacts of and reactions to the kinds of interactions people experience when using new technologies for finding and communicating information.

Focus on impacts of, and roles of, IT in information behavior has been intertwined to a greater and lesser extent with the information behavior research over these decades. Early studies took a fairly stable, largely paper-based environment for granted. Indeed, Garvey's research (23) made salient, perhaps for the first time for many readers of his work, the huge, complex scientific publication cycle, from early tentative verbal presentation at talks all the way through conference presentations, summary reports, journal publication, annual reviews, and finally, incorporation of the scientific results into the established canon in textbooks.

But consciousness of the complexity of the production and publication of science was soon joined by efforts to improve, especially to speed up, the collection, storage, organization, and dissemination of that information. Indeed, the entire discipline of information science has, in one sense, been the story of the successive absorption of a long series of IT innovations, followed, in each case, by research on the impacts of those innovations, and efforts to improve access to information through optimal design of those innovations. With the excitement generated by each new technology, the relatively stable underlying human behaviors and reactions were sometimes forgotten, and the new technology instead seen as the source of a totally new information seeking landscape. One thing we now know, however, after a lot of research on those successive waves of new technology, is that underlying human propensities with regard to information emerge again and again, as each new technology becomes familiar and its use second nature. Often, in the end, the new technologies offer speed and ease of use, while otherwise replicating previous social structures and interactions.

### **1.5 Range of Topics of Information Behavior Research**

What have we learned over the years from the study of information seeking behavior? This is a hard question to answer briefly, to put it mildly, but a description of the sequence of research topics of interest over the years may give a hint of the growing understanding over time of the human relationship with information. What follows is a mere sampling. In the 1940's and 1950's information seeking and gathering tended to be viewed implicitly as the study of the use of various forms of literature – books, journals, handbooks, etc. – and of various types of institutions and their services. How many

books were circulated, how many reference questions were asked, how many people of what economic strata used the public library, and so on (see <sup>(10)</sup>).

In the 1960's and beyond, studies of information seeking and use by the general public opened out the research to incorporate many sources of information, of which the library was only one. The first surprise was to discover how much information – in both personal and professional contexts – people got from friends and colleagues. In a study looking at how scientists' learned of things serendipitously, Menzel found that fellow scientists were immensely important in that process. In fact, in a large number of studies, the human preference to get information from other people was soundly demonstrated.

From early on, the dominance of the "principle of least effort" in human information seeking was demonstrated over and over (25). It may not seem surprising that people try to minimize effort in finding information, but the research demonstrated that ease of access and ease of use mattered more to people than the quality of the information they found. People have a (sometimes unjustified) belief in their ability to filter the good and valid information from the faulty, hence their tendency to under-search to find the highest quality information available.

## II. CONCLUSION

Information behavior research has grown immensely from its scattered beginnings earlier in the twentieth century. We now have a much deeper and less simplistic understanding of how people interact with information. We understand information behavior better within social contexts and as integrated with cultural practices and values. The further complexity of information seeking through the use of various technologies and genres is coming to be better understood, though there is much more to be studied. In fact, even as I write, some six billion people are interacting with information worldwide, drawing on cognitive and evolutionarily shaped behaviors, on social shaping and environmental expectations, and interacting with every information technology from the book to the wireless handheld "smartphone." There is unimaginably much more to learn about information behavior.

The state of our current understandings on these topics is reviewed in over 30 articles in this encyclopedia. See, especially, the section titled "People using cultural resources" in the topical contents list of the encyclopedia.

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