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Everyday practices of documentation, and the influence of information science

When I was doing my Masters degree in Information Science, quite a number of years ago, the idea that the things I and my fellow students were studying were of relevance to everyday life would have seemed strange to us. We were dealing with ways of providing formal published information to academics and professionals; 'scholarly communication' was the name of the game. True, we were aware of public libraries, and contemplated the fact that we might even have to work in such a place if life didn't go according to plan. But what went on there, and, even more, what went on in the informal situations in which most people find and exchange information most of the time, was of no academic concern of ours. When we thought of information sources, they were books, journals and so on, and information users were doctors, engineers, and the like.

How different the world seems now, when the information needs of the 'general public', and issues of 'everyday' information seeking and use have come to the fore, through the work of researchers such as Reijo Savolainen, Pamela McKenzie, Denise Agosto, Elfreda Chatman, Karen Fisher, and others. These studies have not merely expanded the remit of information science, but have brought in with them a series of new perspectives and concepts.

I was led to think of the effects of this 'turn' in the subject, while reading an excellent new book, summarising a number of studies over the years by one of the leading exponents, Reijo Savolainen (Savolainen 2008).

We can see these developments as an extension of the long tradition of 'user studies' and, more broadly, studies of 'information behaviour' (Bawden 2006, Wilson 2006), and as a corrective to some of the limitations of these studies. For one thing, as Savolainen points out the term 'information behaviour' makes no grammatical sense, since information does not behave; we should speak of 'information-related behaviour'. More significantly, the concept of 'information need' is contested; when we see people making use of information in their everyday life, we do not necessarily see 'needy' people; nor, more often than not, do we recognise any explicit needs being met. Indeed, there is not even any consensus as to the proper definition of the, rather basic, concept of 'information use'. Similarly, the term 'behaviour' has rather negative associations with an outdated and positivist 'behaviourist' view of the world, unable to account for the cognitive and emotional aspects of information use. And even when a cognitive is taken (see, for example, Todd 1999), this may overlook the social dimension of shared understanding of information concepts.

Savolainen proposes, as a way of avoiding these limitations, to focus on the idea of 'information practices', reflecting the so-called 'practice turn' in the social sciences generally. The idea of 'practice' is ill-defined, and its genesis long-standing: Savolainen traces its development to theorists such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, Giddens and Bourdieu. There is no consensus as to exactly how this 'generic concept' should be defined, nor how it should be investigated. Indeed, it is interesting that Savolainen's book reports some research into information practices based on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, while later work relies instead on Schutz' and Schatzki's concepts of social phenomenology and the 'life world'. (Interestingly, one of the best-known proponents of information user studies over many years has also identified this approach as fruitful – Wilson 2002.) We can therefore conclude that these ideas should be treated as a general way forward, and a kind of methodological tool kit, rather than anything more prescriptive. It is notable that in the studies reported in his book, Savolainen makes use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, based around semi-structured interviews and critical incident analysis, which has been well-used in studies of information needs and behaviour. The distinction lies in the way the results are analysed and presented, using the idea of the 'information horizon' – essentially an arrangement of information sources according to their perceived nature and value – drawn from the life world perspectives of the information user.

The idea of 'information practice' seems therefore to be one with the potential to include the widest variety of information-related 'doing and sayings', as well as shared understandings and habits. Together with the new interest in the 'everyday' aspect of information seeking and use, it offers the prospect of a new direction for information science. Savolainen's new book is a very good introduction to the issues.

Beyond this, it is perhaps conceivably that this sort of study could lead to the export of ideas from information science into the wider scholarly arena. In this case, the concepts and findings of studies of information practices could feed into, and influence, the more general social science area, from which, of course, the concepts of practice and of social phenomenology have originally come. Reverse influences of this kind would indeed be a mark of the maturity of information science as an academic discipline.

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