

## Chapter 6

# Wilson's Information-Seeking Behavior Models (1981, 1996, 1999)

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter analyzes and compares the goals, key concepts, key features, strengths, and weaknesses of Wilson's information-seeking behavior models. Wilson's models grounded in multi-disciplinary research serve as milestones shaping the information behavior research. The models steered the direction of information behavior research from "system-centric" to "person-centric" inquiries by proposing information-seeking behavior as a new lens in combination with information use to study the dynamic process experienced by users for satisfying information needs. Wilson also introduced "observations to be the "root" method of data collection. The ability of Wilson's models to continue serving as frameworks for developing and testing new combinations of information behavior constructs and theories illustrate the rigor, relevance, and utility of the models in rapidly changing landscape of information environments. As researchers from diverse disciplines employ Wilson's models as a basis for solving the problems of information behavior experienced by well-defined groups from different parts of the world, the models are likely to evolve in the future.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Human information behavior, also known as information behavior, can be defined as "the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information-seeking, and information use" (Wilson, 2000, p.49). Information behavior includes active searching of information through

face-to-face communication and passive reception of information where information is received by the person without any intention to act on it. Information behavior is an umbrella term that covers human and technological factors and their interaction related to seeking, searching, storing, retrieving, processing, and using information. Information-seeking behavior with information searching as its subset is a major part of information behavior.

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## ***Wilson's Information-Seeking Behavior Models (1981, 1996, 1999)***

Hence, it is a common practice to use the terms – “information behavior” and “information-seeking behavior” – interchangeably. Therefore, any model on information-seeking behavior should be seen as a part of information behavior (Wilson, 1996).

Research contributions from science, technology, and social sciences dating back as late as 1940s, have enriched the field of information behavior and helped it evolve significantly. In 1948 for the first time, public presentations on the information behavior of scientists and technologies were delivered at the Royal Society Scientific Information Conference (The Royal Society, 1948). In the early phase (1948 to 1965) of information behavior research, a number of *document-centric* studies explored the ability of documents including answer providing tools to satisfy information needs of library patrons. With the increasing use of tools and technologies for storing and retrieving documents in libraries, the information behavior research experienced the emergence of *system-centric* approach where manual and computer-based document management systems were of prime interest to library and information science (LIS) researchers.

Since the 1980s, information behavior research experienced a gradual shift from the *system-centric* to the *person-centric* approach which focused primarily on *information needs*. Wilson (1994) quotes several reviews to show that the beginning of a move towards more person-centered studies in information behavior was attributed to his 1981 article, together with independent work by Belkin and Dervin. The significance of information environment and information context, which included information-seeker's characteristics and their role and features of the external environment, emerged with the development of person-centric research approach.

### **Why Study Wilson's Work?**

Over a period of 30 years, Wilson's original concept of information behavior (1981) evolved into

the revised model of information (1996) and the revised general model of information behavior (1999), keeping up with the theoretical developments in the information science and allied fields focusing on the person-centric research. Wilson's information behavior models serve as milestones in the “person-centric” research on information behavior.

Key contributions made by Wilson's models in advancing information behavior research warrant for the need to study their evolution. For instance, until 1981 “information need” construct alone dominated the information behavior research. Wilson's (1981) original concept suggested that due to our inability to observe “information need,” an internal state of mind, it was not helpful to rely heavily on information needs to study one's information behavior. Instead a new approach – information-seeking behavior – was necessary to observe the user behavior. As researchers across the world commenced employing various versions of Wilson's models to analyze information behavior of users in diver contexts, it became clear that studying information needs is not enough – it is the context of information needs that plays a central role in shaping overall information behavior of the users. Another prime contribution of his models is to illustrate the utility of “information use” which had received a little attention until then. While developing these models his goal was to link interdisciplinary theories in action rather than proposing a standalone theoretical framework. As a result, all of his models are conceptual models for information behavior research. They are based on observations. Wilson introduced “observations to be the “root” method of data collection, dividing it into direct and indirect variants and further subdividing it into more familiar types, such as ethnographic observations, survey questionnaires, and interviews” (Case, 2006, p. 312).

The following section elaborates the evolution in Wilson's models by synthesizing them and pointing out the key differences in them. The next section illustrates the significance of

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