

Chapter 10

Information Grounds Theory (1999, 2004)

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ABSTRACT

As a study and research topic, information behavior has always remained central to the field of library and information science. Theorization in this area has, likewise, constantly attracted the interest of many researchers and so outbound empirical research has generated an enormous body of literature. Information grounds as a theory is one of the latest evolving phenomena in the area of information behavior. It seeks to interpret peoples' interaction with information in a social context. This chapter attempts to elaborate on the emergence and development of information grounds and its capability to delineate everyday information behavior. The chapter also reviews the literature that has used information grounds as a basis for interpreting information behavior in different social settings and it identifies opportunities for future research in user studies that can build upon information grounds to explore and clarify the information needs and behavior of certain groups in different socio-cultural environments.

INTRODUCTION

Theories or theorization in any given discipline or science remain central to its solidarity and autonomy (Al-Aufi & Lor, 2010) and are considered as a sign of the discipline's academic maturity and recognition (Brookes, 1980; Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001). However, information science is an evolving discipline which was literally transformed from a profession to a scientific discipline at the end of the nineteenth century. Since then, it has strived to reform its existence and development through the influence of its modest theoretical

building (Meadows, 1990; Al-Aufi & Lor, 2010). The majority of theories in information science were borrowed from social sciences or other disciplines (Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001) and they were generally described as weak (Hjørland, 1998). Some information scientists regard these theories as vague and lacking clear conceptual definitions (ex. Poole, 1985; Schrader, 1986; Jarvelin & Vakkari, 1990). In their analysis of 449 articles published in 37 core journals in library and information science during 1985, Jarvelin & Vakkari (1990) concluded that theories were only found in 10% of the inspected articles and the majority

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of them related to issues in information behavior and scholarly communication. Later studies such as those conducted by Julien (1996), Julien and Duggan (2000) in areas of information needs and uses, and Pettigrew & McKechnie (2001) in general areas in information science reported a slight increase in the use of models and theories.

There is no consensus in the literature that treats information as a firm entity. The landscape of information has for decades remained vulnerable to different readings, views, and studies from the information community (Wilson, 2006). Such debatable views and delineations also affect sub-disciplines such as user studies (Case, 2007; Wilson, 2006). Although 'user studies' as a concept emerged in the 1940s (Urquhart, 1948 in Siatry, 1999), information behavior, rooted in user studies, evolved a few decades later and the term was coined in the 1990s. It has become one of the most important researched areas in library and information science (Case, 2006).

Information behavior is not necessarily an intentional behavior. People engage in information behavior coincidentally or purposefully on a daily basis throughout all their life stages (Spink, 2010). It is argued that early humans must have engaged in some sort of information behavior to have control over their environment. Gathering, storing and using information were depicted in drawing cave arts and images of large animals (Spink, 2010). Over centuries, what was first known as unintended information behavior has started to take different forms and shapes to become organized, theorized, and well-planned.

Although the literature point to studies of information seeking behavior since the beginning of the twentieth century (Wildemuth & Case, 2010), theories of information behavior flourished in the 1980s and grew even wider in the 1990s and later on. They were mainly driven by the information revolution and the emergence of the Internet and digital information. The focus of information

behavior also shifted from system-centric to user-centric where the user of information becomes the subject of research for the purpose of developing better and more efficient information systems (Siatry, 1999). However, the latest studies in information behavior have focused on the social and collaborative nature of information; that is, the environment in which people live and their social surroundings (Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001; Wildemuth & Case, 2010).

Spink (2010) claims that information behavior is reshaped by an instinctive factor which has been affected by the environmental and cultural values. She asserts that environmental and cultural influences can make a change in what is called universal information behavior. Put another way, while information behavior is instinctive in all humans, cultural and environmental factors reshape the way information behavior is processed and used (Spink, 2010). Information grounds is a dimension or a model that draws on the sub-reprocesses of information behavior representing the physical and virtual grounds where information behavior or exchange of information happen depending on a socio-cognitive setting (Fisher & Naumer, 2006 and Spink, 2010).

The current chapter explores the emergence and development of information grounds as a model of information behavior that increasingly draws the interest of some researchers to study and explain the social and cultural settings of information behavior, typically, among different small user groups. The chapter also pulls together the body of literature that used information grounds as a basis for empirical research in user studies and discusses the common and contrasting characteristics of located studies. The chapter also attempts to anticipate the future directions of information grounds and whether it could extend clearer understanding of information behavior and user studies.

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