Chapter 15
(Re)Considering Information Science Research:
Embracing Transformative Intent

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an epistemological and ethical justification for (re)considering information science in terms of its potential to contribute to the way in which "information" and "knowledge" become co-constructed in social life in view of social justice aims. The chapter refers to and extends arguments for viewing information science as an interdisciplinary and indeed transdisciplinary endeavor. This is discussed in relation to transformative and indigenous-oriented paradigms for social research considered more generally and also considered specifically in relation to information science (as a social scientific approach). The chapter provides a detailed example of how the transformative potential of information science might be realized. This example can serve as a resource for information science researchers and for information systems practitioners who may find that it has some relevance to their continued work. The chapter also offers suggestions for expanding the research possibilities (co-inquiry options) provided by the example.

INTRODUCTION

Information science (IS) has been variously defined, but it is "broadly, concerned with the creation, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge" (Zins, 2007, p. 336). Zins adds that within the discipline thus defined there are two sub-areas, namely,

- A wide-ranging concern with human and social aspects: information related behavior, organizational and social concerns; and
- A technical/engineering concern with the design and evaluation of information systems (2007, p. 336)

The concern with both of these sub-areas suggests that IS can be focused on what is sometimes called the "subjective" meaning that recipients of information assign to it (in various social contexts) as well as the way in which information systems become technically designed so as to ensure that recipients have access to needed information (as again defined in specific contexts). Some authors in the field of IS regard "information" as such as being neutral in content and as transmitting neutral messages which can "inform" our models of reality. As Capurro and Hørland indicate (2003, p. 355), this view of information is deployed in "empiricist philosophy", where it is taken that objects in the world in-form our senses and thus help us to come to grips with reality – for the purposes of creating better decisions in action than if we were ill-informed. Information science is then seen as primarily concerned with how needed information becomes stored and rendered retrievable in organizational and other contexts, and how the usefulness of the information systems for improving the quality of decision-making can be assessed (through IS research). (This position is associated with a postpositivist paradigm for social research, as expressed by authors such as Adams (2014) and Phillips & Burbules (2000).)

However, a more subjective and intersubjective definition of information suggests that as soon as "information" becomes "received" by recipients, it already harbors meaning (in contexts of action and interaction). Hence, Capurro and Hørland point out that in the first place "criteria for what counts as information are formed by sociocultural and scientific processes" (p. 395). This is because users of "information" are always situated "in concrete situations within social organizations and domains of knowledge" (p. 395). They give an example of a stone:

A stone on a field could contain different information for different people (or from one situation to another). It is not possible for information systems to map all the stone's possible information for every individual. Nor is any one mapping the one "true" situation. But people have different educational backgrounds and play different roles in the division of labor in society. A stone in a field represents typically some kind of information for the geologist, and another kind for the archaeologist [and another for lay actors deciding on its meaning for them] (Capurro & Hørland 2003, p. 395).

They argue that once we (as information scientists and indeed as lay actors) recognize the meaningful component of any information received, we are embracing a "hermeneutic view because the understanding is determined by the pre-understanding of the observer". They refer to the explicit "information hermeneutics" which has been developed by Capurro in earlier work. And they note that this approach has affinities "with the approach known as social constructivism (e.g., Frohmann, 1994; Savolainen, 2000)" (Capurro & Hørland 2003, pp. 395-396).

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