Theories and models of users’ information behavior

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Why interest in users’ information behavior?

- It is a common human behavior, basic to human existence
- It includes a rich variety of human involvement (cognitive, affective, physical)
- It permeates all areas and levels of human activity
- It is now more visible as a phenomenon in a digital environment and less defined by formal information sources and institutions.
Some key definitions

- **Information**
  Any difference users perceive in their environment or within themself; any aspect that they notice in their pattern of reality

- **Information need**
  A recognition that one’s knowledge is inadequate to satisfy some goal

- **Information seeking**
  A conscious effort to acquire information in response to a need or a gap in one’s knowledge

- **Information behavior**
  A totality of human behaviors involving acquiring, using, sharing, avoiding, etc. of information
## Importance of users’ information behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less important</th>
<th>More Important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One person affected</td>
<td>Th却sands affected</td>
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<tr>
<td>A consumer gathers information to help in buying a car</td>
<td>Voters use information to choose among competing candidates for public office</td>
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There are variety of approaches
There is no clean, logical delineation of factors by specific activities and environments
Not only LIS is involved, also: communication, management, medicine, sociology, computer science, etc.
In this lecture, focus on models and theories regardless of a specific context
Models of Information Behavior

What is a model?

- Essentially, all models are wrong but some are useful” - George E.P. Box (1987, p. 424)
- A tentative ideational structure used as a testing device...
- Simplified representation of the real world..
- Speculation about processes (Lave & March, 1975)
The scope of IB models

Macro models:
- A bird’s perspective (limited detail)
- Conceptual view
- General application (not sensitive to specific information environments)
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive
- Example: Kirkelas (1983)
The scope of IB models

Micro models:
- Focus on specific sub-types of IB (e.g., steps in information seeking)
- Typically process oriented and time sensitive
- Can be “nested” into macro models
Wilson`s modeles of IB

- Evolved over 15 years with increased level of detail
- 1971, 1981 – The information users and the universe of knowledge (macro model)
- 1981 – Information need and seeking
- 1996 – A revised general model of information-seeking behavior
Wilson’s models

1981

1996
About theories in users’ IB research

- Theory is a basic building block of inquiry
- Theories explain and provide basis for generalizations
- Grand theories of IB (top to bottom)
- Grounded theories of IB (bottom to up)
- There is no one single theory of IB
- Many theories relevant to IB come from outside LIS
Theories of Information Behavior

- 2005 ASIST monograph, edited by Fisher, Erdelez, and McKechnie
- Includes 72 theories & models from LIS and other fields that related to IB:
- New and revised edition is currently in preparation
Three prominent theories & paradigms

- **Principle of Least Effort (Zipf)**
  - An individual will adopt a course of action that will involve the expenditure of least work
  - Use of information that is the closest to the user, most accessible, most visible, etc.

- **Sense-making (Dervin)**
  - Information does not exist apart from human behavioral activity and is created in a specific time & space
  - Information is not objective, it is created internally
  - Life is an encounter with problems and discontinuities in knowledge

- **Life in the Round (Chatman)**
  - Based on the study of information behavior of female inmates in a maximum security prison
  - Prisoners avoid gathering information about the external world
“Theory is not like a pair of glasses; it is rather like a pair of guns; it does not enable one to see better, but to fight better.” (Merquior discussing French philosopher Michel Foucault’s view of the use of theory)
One more use of a theory...