Information behavior research in dialogue with neighboring fields

Isto Huvila* and Ying-Hsang Liu
Department of ALM, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Information behavior, one of the central topics in information science research, holds a key position as a field of study of how people interact with information. As such it has many points of connection to a large number of neighboring fields from the study of human behavior to management and technical disciplines interested in developing technologies to support people in their endeavors. At the same time, information behavior researchers have a long tradition of self-critical debate on how to best engage with neighboring fields.

As a part of the 2022 ISIC, the Information Behavior Conference, organized at the Berlin School of Library and Information Science at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, a panel session inquired into the interchange between information behavior research and neighboring fields (Huvila & Liu, 2022). The panelists participating in the discussion were professors Elke Greifeneder, Heidi Julien, J. Tuomas Harviainen, Christa Womser Hacker, Ying-Hsang Liu and Isto Huvila.

The invited panelists and the audience that filled the room had a lot of hands-on experience on working with several neighboring fields. Greifeneder has conducted a lot of information behavior studies in the context of user experience research, Julien has worked extensively with professionals from a wide range of contexts whereas Harviainen's work covers design studies, interactive media and information practices. Womser Hacker's work span over information behavior, information retrieval and human-computer interaction communities. Liu's research lies at the intersection of information retrieval, knowledge organisation, and human information behavior, with a particular emphasis on the design and evaluation of interactive information retrieval systems. Huvila has worked extensively with archaeologists, library, archive and museum professionals and healthcare.

1. Information behavior through backdoor

Elke Greifeneder from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, who is the only professor

---

*Corresponding author: Isto Huvila, Department of ALM, Uppsala University, Sweden. E-mail: isto.huvila@abm.uu.se.

with a chair specifically in information behavior in Germany, described how she regularly needs to explain her field and research to colleagues from neighboring fields. Often this is easiest through the backdoor of comparing information behavior to user experience and usability studies, and to explain how fields differ. She is often contacted to do user experience (UX) and usability studies, eye tracking and qualitative interviews instead of investigating information behavior. Ten years ago many people were talking about usability. Now the keyword tends to be UX. Yet, it is information behavior research that provides useful answers to the questions her colleagues are looking for.

J. Tuomas Harviainen from Tampere University remarked that making information behavior research understandable requires marketing and learning to use appropriate terminologies that resonate with collaborating communities. It is also about playing audiences and highlighting aspects of one's work that might be of interest to people from other fields. Also citing strategic work between different fields and adding information behavior references to work when publishing outside of information science is a proven strategy used by Harviainen.

Isto Huvila from Uppsala University referred to the same by reflecting on how he had learned to explain what he as an information behavior researcher does. According to him, it usually works to say that it is only partly about information technology and more about people and information. At the same time, as he added, it is important to recognize what the unique vantage point of information studies to questions discussed together with colleagues from other disciplines and contexts. Being able to tell what information behavior perspective adds to investigating a phenomenon is the best selling point for an information behavior researcher.

Heidi Julien, professor at the University at Buffalo, made the same observation and described her long-standing collaboration with a colleague from a business school, professor Brian Detlor as an illustrative example of how information behaviour research can easily be linked to the work in related fields if a common point of interest can be found. In their case it was the concept of digital literacy that helped to make information behavior research more approachable to colleagues from neighboring fields and vice versa.

Huvila made another parallel observation to using terms that resonate with colleagues. Even if "information" is the magic keyword of information behavior researchers, all the problems an information behavior researcher sees is an information problem for others. It is important to try to understand what is the real concern of people and how others see it sometimes as a technical issue or a human problem. Even if an information researcher would see a problem in the lack of information sharing, the real concern for those involved could be, for example, to get their work done or earning their salary. Improved information sharing could be the answer but often it needs to be sold as a solution to different issue.

2. Same, same, but different

When talking to colleagues in neighbouring practical and academic fields, a relevant question to ask is how information behavior research differs from the work in other communities. Elke Greifeneder reflected on her work on the borderline between UX and information behavior. She noted that in a classical sense, information behavior is less straightforward and oriented towards understanding and explaining human information interactions in a broader scope. In contrast, a lot of UX and usability research is focused on individual systems and contexts. Still, as Greifeneder notes, UX, human-computer interaction and information behavior are close relatives and their differences are not always too apparent. Christa Womser-Hacker from the University of Hildesheim agreed and added that, for example, information retrieval research engages regularly with more or less the same questions as information behavior research.

As Ying-Hsang Liu from Oslo Metropolitan University, remarked, perhaps the most crucial difference is that all these closely related fields have developed their own communities. As Julien added, many of the differences pertain to disciplinary norms, publication channels and expectations of how to study information behavior rather than that the interests of the individual fields would be radically different. A major difference between information behavior and its more technical relatives is that it is focused on analyzing information practices whereas its cousins are more focused on constructing systems. Womser-Hacker emphasized that she does not like boundaries. She works on multimedia information retrieval, multilingual information retrieval, and culture-oriented human-computer interaction, and finds information behavior research as an important resource for her work. For her it is both natural and extremely important to be interested in and aware of both analytical and constructive lines of inquiry in the information field.

Sometimes the underlining of differences lead to what Harviainen described as disciplinary arrogance. Ideas get refused both in information science and other disciplines because they were not invented here. Harviainen underlined that information science venues are far from being innocent of this frustrating tendency even if information behavior researchers are likely to stumble upon the same when trying to publish in neighboring fields.

This does not mean, however, that disciplinary communities such as information behavior research should not make a case for its own existence and unique perspective. Harviainen emphasized that he does not see information studies as a paradiscipline or applied philosophy of information – a comment which gathered a lot of nodding from the conference audience.

3. Studying people takes time

A factor that distinguishes fields is what parts of the work is supposed to take a lot of time. The work of practitioners is often fast-paced and solution-oriented

when compared to academic research. As Julien notes, this makes collaborations with practitioners often difficult. Practitioners' expectations of quick results are at odds with the disciplinary norms and timelines of scholarly research that aims at robust and in-depth insights rather than at solving immediate practical problems. Greifeneder added also that a university department does not work like a consultancy. Results cannot be delivered in a week because of many practical reasons but also for the higher demands for documenting and planning research and doing deeper and more robust analyses.

The time needed to inquire into information behaviour can come as a surprise also in cross-disciplinary research collaborations. For other disciplines, a rudimentary investigation of user behavior is merely a small task before the real work starts. Greifeneder underlined how an information behavior researcher often needs to explain that doing in-depth studies with people requires time and resources. Doing quick and dirty UX work is different from in-depth inquiries into complex human information interactions.

4. Face-to-face interaction important

According to Julien's long experience of working together with a large number of professional groups from librarians to social workers, face to face interaction with practitioner colleagues is key to creating a common understanding of expectations and possible ways forward. Julien emphasizes that it is important to make one's own points easily understood, read the literature in other fields and put effort on in-person relationship building with colleagues.

According to Harviainen's and Huvila's experience, in academic collaborations a useful approach to developing and fostering mutual understanding is to write papers together. When writing, you need to explain your point to others briefly and clearly. Writing can also help to clarify how some discipline-specific perspectives differ and what questions are considered important in individual disciplines. Such differences can range from what is expected to be reported on empirical research material and research methods to broader philosophical questions of what is important to know and how things can be known.

5. Making it actionable

Even if choosing the right words is important for making a collaboration work, it is also important to make research results relatable and actionable for others.

The gap between normative models of human (information) behavior and how individuals interact with information is characteristic to information behavior research. For information behavior researchers it is not necessarily a problem. Everyone in the field knows that many of the key models are extreme simplifications. However, for

a colleague coming from another context, their lack of correspondence with actual human behavior might suggest that the models are bad. Here, an information behavior researcher might want to ask if the nature of the information behavior models needs to be better clarified when presenting them. Another equally relevant question is if it would be possible to do something with the models themselves.

A related issue to helping others to understand information behavior research underlined by Greifeneder is that the information behavior community is not especially good at making interventions. As she remarked, this is in direct contrast to UX that is always asking how to apply results. While information behavior research has been very successful in shedding light on the complexity of how people deal with information, many of the results are not actionable. Practical applicability should not be expected of all research of course. However, in information behavior field, the reluctance to intervene seems to apply also to many practice-oriented studies with a clearly conceivable potential to make direct recommendations. An information systems researcher is always expecting to find a paragraph in a research article that described the practical implications of the findings to systems development. Information behavior studies tend to discuss implications on a much more abstract level and often emphasise only how understanding information practices in a specific context is important. None of the two approaches is necessarily bad but the differences make cross-disciplinary collaborations more difficult.

6. Significant contributions to come

The panelists and audience alike agreed on that engaging with neighboring fields is useful and important for information behavior research. Similarly, these engagements have a lot of potential to make significant contributions across the fields out of information behaviour research and back. From a practical perspective, Womser-Hacker underlined that in comparison to its neighboring fields, information behavior research is in especially good position to inquire deeper into how people actually interact with information systems and technologies, why systems work as they do and what it all implies to the development of new information retrieval and management systems. Other panelists identified comparable opportunities across other fields and collaborations from developing literacy training to match what information behavior research knows about information literacy interventions to developing information work and management practices to correspond with what people really need and find helpful. For advancing research and theory across disciplines, the super power of information behavior research is beyond doubt in how it can bring clarity to the complexity of human information interactions and their implications to human behavior.

At the end of the panel, many participants emphasized the importance of a continuing discussion within information behavior research on its relation to neighboring fields. Panels and sessions at future conferences were welcomed similarly to continu-

ing the exchange in other forms and formats. However, even if discussing is important, as professor Nadia Caidi (University of Toronto) from the audience remarked at the end, the key to furthering engagements with neighbouring fields is to work with others instead of only talking about collaborations.

Reference

Isto, H., & Liu, Y.-H. (2022). Information Behaviour Research in Dialogue with Neighbouring Fields, September. doi: 10.18452/25292.