Dossier temático: Comportamiento humano informativo

The Past and Future of Information Behaviour Research, Through a Wilsonian Lens

Pasado y future de la Investigación en Comportamiento Informativo, a través de la vision Wilsoniana

O Passado e o Futuro da Pesquisa de Comportamento Informacional, Através de uma Lente Wilsoniana

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Abstract

The history and current state of Information Behaviour (IB) research is described, along with the particular influence of Professor Tom Wilson in the development of the field. Changes in the use of theories and methodologies are considered, along with current and future research topics and the interdisciplinary impact of IB research.

Keywords: RESEARCH; INFORMATION BEHAVIOUR; THEORY; METHODOLOGY; TRENDS

Resumen

Se describe la historia y el estado actual de la investigación del comportamiento informativo (CI), junto con la influencia particular del profesor Tom Wilson en el desarrollo del campo. Se consideran los cambios en el uso de teorías y metodologías, junto con temas de investigación actuales y futuros y el impacto interdisciplinario de la investigación del CI.

Palabras clave: INVESTIGACIÓN; COMPORTAMIENTO INFORMATIVO; TEORÍA; METODOLOGÍA; TENDENCIAS

Resumo

A história e o estado atual da pesquisa de comportamento informacional (IB) são descritos, juntamente com a influência particular do professor Tom Wilson no desenvolvimento do campo. Mudanças no uso de teorias e metodologias são

consideradas, juntamente com questões de pesquisa atuais e futuras e o impacto interdisciplinar da pesquisa IC.

1. Introduction

I've been asked to comment on the past and future of Information Behaviour (IB) research. Given that this issue of *Informatio* honors Professor Tom Wilson, let's consider the "history" portion as it parallels Wilson's influential career. From his early publications (with David Streatfield) on the British Library-funded Project INISS (Information in Social Services), to his establishment of two influential journals (*Social Science Information Studies*, and *Information Research*), Tom Wilson suggested how investigations of information could develop and improve.

Tom Wilson saw that answering deeper questions required a different approach— that we needed to examine both individual meaning-making, and communication with others. In particular he pointed out the relevance of phenomenology, and approaches like ethnomethodology and cognitive sociology. Tom could see that theory-based methodologies were needed for the field to mature, and to connect it with other disciplines. His vision strongly shaped the present state of Information Behaviour research.

To advance his agenda, Dr. Wilson did more than teach and conduct innovative research. He also established means of encouraging and disseminating like-minded results, first with his journal *Social Science Information Studies* (1980-1984) and later with one of the earliest online journals, *Information Research* (1995). He was an important figure in the biennial series of Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) conferences, the 14th of which took place in Berlin in 2022.From 2000 to 2003 he was Editor of *The New Review of Information*

Behaviour Research, a paper journal of ISIC conference papers. Despite the distractions of these projects, he has continued to publish influential articles every year for more than four decades, and recently what is sure to be a popular book, *Exploring Information Behaviour* (Wilson, 2022).

2. How IB Research Changed Since 1980

The research that has become known as Information Behavior has a past that dates back to the 19th century. A chapter in Case and Given (2016) details that history, from the early studies of reading habits and library use, through the 1940-1970 era of scientific and technical information dissemination and information retrieval systems. As Wilson (1994) describes the period from the the latter era, most investigations were a theoretical, descriptive and system-oriented, in keeping with the practical ends that many studies intended. The primary method used was the survey, conducted on paper, interviews, or a mixture of the two. Most of the results were statistical in nature, and rarely shed light on deeper human experiences with information.

This pattern began to change in Europe during the 1970s, and somewhat later in North America, toward a more person-oriented approach that needed to consider social interaction. Investigations moved away from quantitative measures, and in the direction of qualitative studies—in some cases correlated with the adoption of a certain theory. So there have been continuing changes in the adoption of *theory*, the types of *methodologies* employed, and also in the *scope* of contexts and topics investigated. I'll discuss each of these developments in turn.

Since 1980 many researchers have pointed out the relevance of particular *theories* or concepts. For example, *Theories of Information Behavior* (Fisher, Erdelez and McKechnie, 2005) contained 72 entries (each describing a theory or concept), while Case and Given (2016) discussed 24 that met their criteria for a formal theory. Given, Case and Willson (2023, in press) examines the appearance of citations to theories or theorists in four journals that publish much IB research (*JASIST, Information Research, the Journal of Documentation* and *LISR*), and identifythe ten theories that have been most highly-cited in those journals since 2002.

In his early work (Wilson & Streatfield, 1977, 1979) described relevant theory from sociology. Their investigation of social service departments, Project INISS, employed structured observation emphasizing qualitative analysis and reporting. In later works Wilson argued (1981a, 1981b) for the importance of theory, particularly sociological theories that emphasized social *actions* (versus that of social *systems*) in the formation of our social reality.

Not surprisingly, out of the "top ten" theories discussed in Given, Case and Willson (2023), at least seven emerged from sociology (and anthropology), including Schutz's (1967) Phenomenology of the Social World (a favorite of Wilson's), three streams of Practice theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990, Lave & Wenger, 1991, Schatzki, 1996) and Giddens' (1986) Structuration Theory (which was based on Bourdieu's notion of practice), as well as theories of social networks (e.g., Granovetter, 1982) and social capital (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). The three other highly-cited theories in the list emerged from psychology, education/learning and the humanities. So it could be said that Tom Wilson predicted the wider use of sociological theory, along with some of the methodologies necessitated by those theories.

In terms of *methodology*, we have seen more use of structured observation of behavior, naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and in-depth (such as ethnographic) interviews. These techniques are mostly borrowed from sociology, anthropology and psychology, to help us understand the motives and meanings inherent in the actions and discourse of individuals and groups. Over the last four decades many researchers have adopted Dervin's (1992) sense making methodology, phenomenological (constructivist) observation (Schutz, 1967; Wilson, 2002), Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014), discourse analysis (Potter, 1996; Talja, 1999) or ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Sandstrom and Sandstrom, 1995). These methodologies apply across multiple theories.

Finally we have seen a broadening of *scope* in recent years, with more emphasis on social interaction. Most obviously the range of information sources has increased facilitated by new channels that connect us with other humans: email, texts, file exchanges, social media, cellular and video conversations, and so forth.

These modalities in turn promote interaction: discovering, encountering, sharing, and collaborating. Research now encompasses factors and topics that were rarely considered forty years ago, such as emotion, affect, sharing, embodiment, and literacy, among others. These aspects of information experiences are now mainstream topics of investigation.

In conclusion, Information Behaviour has embraced new perspectives, theories, and methods that were not widely considered in 1980.

3. Future Trends in Information Behaviour Research

Of course, it is always unwise to predict the future. Nevertheless, I will comment on what I see in terms of current concerns and topics growing in popularity.

One persistent concern has been that findings in IB have little influence outside of the communities of researchers who publish them. Wilson (2020) presents evidence to the contrary. He shows that the disciplines of Computer Science and Education, along with the more amorphous research areas of Information Systems and Health, have regularly drawn on work in Information Behavior. Other academics, Gorichanaz and Venkatagiri (2021), comment on the connections between IB and work in Human-Computer Interaction. More generally, Wilson (2020) points to the many citations to Carol Kuhlthau, Brenda Dervin, Reijo Savolainen, as well as to his own work, to demonstrate that IB research does indeed have impact outside of Information Studies.

I concur with Wilson's arguments about interdisciplinary influence. The recognition and impact of IB has definitely increased, due to the changes described above, and also because of this: there has been has been a multi-decade movement for Information Studies departments to merge with units with overlapping concerns—Communication, Media Studies, Journalism, Education, Information Systems or Computer Science to name the most common. This physical proximity has exposed other academics to research on Information Behavior.

From my own, 40-year, involvement with Communication Studies, I can say that the long-standing overlap in interests and persons has only grown during that

time, especially in the area of Health Communication (see, for example, Johnson and Case, 2012). I think it is also the case that the more IB research is able to demonstrate the effects or outcomes (Case & O'Connor, 2016) of information experiences, the more its research will be cited in other fields. This also implies investigations of "use" in the strong sense of applying it to cause an effect (as opposed to merely consulting a source of information); see the work of Granikov, El Sherif, Bouthillier and Pluye, (2022), and Pluye, El Sherif, *et al.* (2019) for examples of outcomes.

What developments might offer new topics or the means of studying them? Here again, Tom Wilson has ventured his opinion (2022, pp. 97-98). He points to future developments in computing and machine learning. These will offer both additional ways of learning and communicating, as well as tools to analyze records of human interactions.

While social media continues to morph, there will be new twists and capabilities to study. As I write this, Twitter is in decline, allowing competing apps (e.g., TikTok, Weibo and a host of others) to capture part of its audience and content. And, as we have seen from the COVID-19 pandemic, new topics will emerge from crises caused by climate change (e.g., mass migrations, social and political upheavals) and future pandemics. In keeping with those problems, provision of health information will always be a hot topic, while misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories will continue to spread and offer opportunities for study and analysis.

Whichever trends prevail, it can be seen that Information Behaviour research has developed in several dimensions, and continues to attract interest. There will be much more to study in the years to come.

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Editor's Note

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Author contribution note

I was the sole author of the article, preparing 100% of the text.