No such thing as society? On the individuality of information behaviour

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Abstract

This opinion piece considers the relative importance of individual and social factors in determining information behaviour. It concludes that individual factors are more central and fundamental, though they may certainly be qualified by social and cultural factors, and though there are good reasons for studying and analyzing information behaviour in terms of social groups. More studies of interesting emergent factors and behaviours in social settings would be valuable.

> "All people are individuals and will seek and use information in different ways … [information gathering] is an integral part of our personalities, and we all do it differently. There is no such thing as a homogenous body of information users."
> (Line, 1998, p. 223)

Introduction

In a book chapter dealing with studies of individual 'information styles' (Bawden and Robinson, 2011), we remarked that "information behaviour is, by definition, individual". A reviewer commented that they found this 'jarring', as – with other chapters in the volume being reviewed – it "misses an important aspect of current thinking – that information behavior is more fruitfully considered a social practice" (Julien 2012).

This rather surprised us, as it seems to us that the idea that information behaviour is inherently individual – though obviously strongly influenced by social factors, and sometimes strongly collaborative - is entirely uncontentious. After all, whenever we examine any specific instance of information behaviour, we necessarily find an individual person exhibiting it. However, we recognize that, in practice, information behaviour has almost always been discussed in terms of social groupings of one form or another. This short article muses on this dichotomy, and tries to suggest ways in which it may provoke fruitful research. Its brevity means that we have over-simplified several complicated issues, and in particular have conflated a number of distinct sociocultural approaches.

Why prioritise the 'socialness' of information behaviour?

There are three general reasons for declining to accept the individuality of information behaviour, or at least to prioritise its conception as a social, rather, than an individual phenomenon.

The first is at root pragmatic. We cannot hope to study or analyse the detailed information behaviour, or practices, of each individual: although such studies have, in fact, been carried out, see for example Julien and Michels (2004) and Ruvane (2005). Therefore we study, and discuss the behaviour of groups: traditionally by occupation or academic discipline, more recently by role, demographic status, etc. (Case, 2006; Case, 2012; Bawden and Robinson, 2012, chapter 9), and typically "students, scholars and professionals" (Julien, Pecoskie and Reed, 2011). This is obviously justifiable, since there is great commonality within such groups in the kind of information needed, the sources likely to be consulted, and the way in which information is used and communicated. In particular, an understanding of the commonality of forms of knowledge accepted within such groups is the basis for the idea of domain analysis: see Hjørland and Albrechtsen (1995) and Hjørland (2002A; 2002B)

The second reason is that there may be emergent properties within information behaviour which are properties of groups and not of individuals: "some collective behaviour that cannot be predicted by looking at the single elements forming the system" (Caldarelli and Catanzaro, 2012, p.2). We may see an analogy in the physical world where many concepts are emergent, in the sense that they are seen, and have a meaning, only on a macroscopic scale. A familiar example is temperature, and more esoteric example is entropy: these may be measured, or calculated, for bulk matter, and have no meaning for individual atoms or molecules (for accessible accounts, see Atkins, 2010 and Carroll, 2011). If such properties exist for information behaviour, then this would indeed be a reason to focus exclusively on the social rather than the individual.

The third is that we may consider information behaviour to be entirely socially constructed, so that a focus on the individual would be misplaced and unhelpful.

Pragmatism
To the first of these, we certainly accept the validity of both the pragmatic need to study groups rather than individuals. This is notwithstanding the criticisms which have been made of such informational groups and categories, an early example being that of Devin (1989, p 217), who asserts that "categories of users are inventions or constructions, the by-product of the particular kind of microscope that observers bring to the observing task"; see also Talja (1997) for similar criticisms. We accept also the insights to be gained from the socio-cognitive paradigm which underlies domain analysis (Hjørland and Albrechtsen, 1995; Hjørland, 2002A; Hjørland, 2002B). However, the value of studies of information behaviour within domains does not invalidate the fact that such behaviour is inherently individual. To continue with the physical analogy, it has been generally accepted for over a century that matter is composed of atoms. It is not feasible to examine the properties of all the individual atoms in a macroscopic sample, to account for its properties; nor is it

necessary, as the success of statistical mechanics shows (Carroll, 2011). All that is needed is a statistical understanding of how atoms behave in large ensembles. However, this does not deny that that it is the behaviour of individual atoms which ultimately dictates the behaviour of matter on larger scales; simply that we need not take explicit account of this. Further, the physical analysis depends on the idea that atoms are identical and interchangeable; hardly an idea which we would wish to apply to persons, even a crude approximation. We may agree that medical students, for example, share many information practices rooted on a common working environment requiring a common form of knowledge, and we may well be able to generalize about their information behaviour and needs, so as to be able to provide good information services to them. But we should not, we think, go on to allege that all medical students are identical informationally; there will be clear and discernable differences between them, based on individual and personal factors; see Bawden and Robinson (2011) for examples of studies showing such differences in a wide variety of social groups.

It is interesting, perhaps rather ironic, to note that the results of studies of what are invariably termed 'individual differences' in information behaviour, although focused on personal and individual factors, are generally presented as another form of grouping. Rather than to an occupation, academic discipline or other social grouping (engineer, nurse, historian, graduate student, gourmet cook, homeless person), information behaviour is related to personality, learning style or thinking style (introvert, reflector, holist), or to a grouping empirically identified in a particular study, such as Palmer's (1991) "lone, wide rangers" and 'confident collectors'; more examples are given in Bawden and Robinson (2011).

The practical advantages of dealing with groups is clear, even when the focus of attention is on the personal characteristics of individual people. This emphasises that there is no conflict between the belief that information behaviour is intrinsically individual, and that there is both pragmatic value and great insight to be gained from analyzing it in terms of social groups.

Emergence
The second reason is particularly interesting, if it can be shown that there are emergent forms of information behaviour which are seen for groups, but are meaningless for individuals. We might expect this to be seen particularly clearly in the study of information networks, as emergent properties are known to be associated with networks of relationships (Caldarelli and Catanzano, 2012). One such example which may be cited of such an emergent group behaviour is associated with the study of a network of information researchers, by the methods of social network analysis (Cooke and Hall, 2013). This described changes in density and centrality of connectedness within the network, as time progressed. These, and similar, metrics of network connectivity are clearly properties of the network, and not of any individual within it, so these are clearly examples of emergent properties. However, we may say that to explain in detail the nature of the connectivity will involve analyzing the individuals within the network; again showing that it is individual behaviour which is fundamental in determining these emergent

properties. The same is, of course, true in the physical analogy: although temperature, and entropy, are meaningful only for large 'clumps' of matter, they are explicable in terms of the statistics of the energy states of the individual particles of which it is composed (Atkins, 2012; Carroll, 2011).

However, in general, it does not seem that such emergent properties have yet been identified in studies of information behaviour, at least to any great extent. To illustrate this, there are set out below a set of typical statements summarizing the information behaviour of various groups, taken from Case (2012):

- make more use of their own knowledge, colleagues and within-organisation sources of information than they do of the technical literature [engineers]
- relevance of sources is the most compelling reason for their use, followed by accessibility and technical quality or reliability [scientists and engineers]
- satisfy much of their information needs through contact with colleagues in the workplace and at conferences [scientists and scholars]
- rate email as more helpful than electronic discussion groups [music scholars]
- most information acquired through reading [philosophers]
- relatively little use is made of libraries or internet resources [doctors]
- consult primarily local sources of information [nurses]
- people and conversations are their main sources of information [managers]
- tend to gather information they do not need in a quest to simply their environment and help make faster decisions [managers]
- have a need for information for inspiration [artists]
- [exhibit] a closed pattern of information seeking [for theological roles] … more open to information from outside their social group when providing care to others [religious ministers]
- [information behaviour reflects] importance of oral traditions and local knowledge [artisans]
- [information seeking is] not purposeful but .. simply a part of everyday life information practices [general public]
- information is obtained both purposefully and incidentally from all sources [older people]

Though this process is far from rigorous, this suggests that the terms used to describe the behaviours of groups are very much the same as those which would be applied to that of individual persons. This suggests that emergent forms of information behaviour are rare, or perhaps difficult to identify. While the search for emergent forms of information behaviour offers a fascinating area for research, it is not clear that many such will necessarily be found; nor that, if found, these will invalidate the idea that it is individual behaviour which is fundamental.

Socialisation
As regards the third reason, it is evident that information behaviour can occur only in the social context. A totally isolated individual, having no-one else to communicate with, not even by reading or creating documents, could not have any information behaviour or information practices. It is also true to say that information behaviour

and information practices are self-evidently formed by, and continually influenced by, social interaction and norms. However, this does not negate the, equally self-evident, fact that it is individual people who develop such behaviour and practices. The successful application of phenomenological methods within the information sciences, focusing on the experiences of conscious individuals, is an illustration of this.

This is seen most clearly in the study of information behaviour through the concept of 'information practices', rooted in the social norms of a community of practitioners; see, for example, Talja and Hansen (2005), Sundin and Johannison (2005), and Savolainen (2008). As Savolainen (2008, p42) puts it, "most researchers agree that a significant characteristic of the concept of information practice is the central role of social and cultural factors qualifying information seeking, use and sharing". He goes on to point out that "from the perspective of social phenomenology, it is apparent that everyday information practices are strongly directed by an individual's interests that structure the life world into regions of decreasing relevance" (Savolainen, 2008, p 59). This life world is defined elsewhere (Savolainen, 2008, p65) as comprising the totality of individual experiences (the perceived life-world) affected by social, cultural and economic factors. The social factors therefore, vital though they are in this approach, serve to qualify the perceptions of individual people.

There are, of course, numerous studies of cooperative and collaborative information behaviour, where the focus of the study is on such collaborative aspects [1]. However, such studies do not ignore individuality; rather the opposite. For example, Prekop (2002) in a study of collaborative information seeking, identifies roles – such as information gatherer, information verifier and group administrator – which individuals take up to facilitate such collaboration, and notes that the nature and effectiveness of collaboration may be affected by the background of the individuals concerned, and even whether they like each other.

We have to conclude that the interaction of individual and social factors in forming information behaviour is subtle, as is clear from numerous recent studies, and that the importance of the social does not justify minimizing the significance of the individual.

Conclusions
The three reasons discussed above are all good reasons for studying, analyzing and summarising information behaviour in terms of social groups, and for considering the social dimensions which may affect, or indeed determine, individual perceptions and behaviour. They are very good reasons for seeking to establish whether there are emergent forms of information behaviour, and what are the specifics of the way in the individual and social interact in forming such behaviours. They are not, however, good reasons to assert that the social necessarily and invariably outweighs the individual.

It may be objected that our view is inappropriately reductionist, particularly in view of the physical analogies employed. This is far from the case. What we emphasise is the uniqueness and individuality of each person; this should not be minimized, even in view of the pragmatic advantages of studying information behaviour primarily in group and social terms, and a recognition of the importance, on many occasions of social context and collaboration. This is not at all inconsistent with a desire to identify and study interesting emergent information behaviours which are not predicable from individual cases. Identification of such features would surely be a major advance in the topic.

We do not have to agree with Margaret Thatcher (1987) that there is no such thing as society [2] to recognize the ultimate individuality of what we study when we study information behaviour. Rather, we should accept that an inherently individual set of behaviours and practices are very strongly influenced by social factors, and seek new insights in the overlap and interplay of the social and the individual.

Footnotes

[1] We are grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing out the relevance of these studies.

[2] Although Margaret Thatcher's quotation is usually given as simply *there is no such thing as society*, the words in the interview transcript are *… who is society? There is no such thing* and later *There is no such thing as society. There is living tapestry of men and women and people [sic]*. Notwithstanding this, Thatcher went on to say a number of things about society and its problems in the interview. The phrase was reproduced in the interview report in a rather different context from the original interview transcript. A statement explaining the remark was later issued and published in the *Sunday Times* 10th July 1988, with the formulation *.. society as such does not exist except as a concept. Society is made up of people*. The detailed story, with the full interview transcript is given on the website of the Margaret Thatcher Foundation at http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

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