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Information behaviour research for what? The role of information behaviour research in addressing societal challenges

Noora Hirvonen, Aylin Imeri, Dirk Lewandowski, Ola Pilerot and Olof Sundin (moderator)

Abstract

The panel initiates a discussion on the role of information behaviour research in addressing major challenges facing our society. These include climate change, political extremism, and health threats – in many of which information plays a crucial role. The panel asks, first, what is the role and responsibility of information behaviour research in addressing societal challenges, and second, is there a risk of jeopardising the conceptual coherence of the research field if information behaviour researchers to a greater extent direct their research to address major societal challenges? In the panel, five panelists will present their specific position to the questions after which all attendees are invited to participate in the discussion. A broad audience is expected, as the topic should be of interest to everyone at the conference.

Summary of content and contribution to the ISIC 2022

Purpose, goals, expected outcomes and contribution to the conference theme

The goal of the panel is to initiate a discussion on the role of information behaviour research in addressing current major societal challenges. We aim for a broad audience, as the topic should be of interest to everyone at the conference. The issues raised are broad and relevant to the ISIC 2022 conference theme.

Summary of content

What role can the study of information behaviour play in addressing the major challenges facing society? Anthropogenic climate change is already claiming lives. Refugees are not only trying to flee the effects of climate change, but also religious fanaticism and political extremism. Populism is on the rise, even in countries once considered stable democracies. We face COVID-19, antibiotic resistance, and other potentially life-threatening health problems. A combination of conspiracy theories, often reinforced by commercial platforms, and a general decline in trust makes for a toxic mix. At the same time, the social media and search engine market is heavily dominated by a few global corporations. There are examples of information behaviour research taking on such challenges (e.g. Bates et al., 2019; Cooke, 2017; Haider, 2012; Noble, 2019), not the least concerning COVID-19 (Montesi, 2021). However, looking at the papers from previous ISIC conferences, in this forum research interest in addressing these challenges seems almost non-existent. We believe that tying information behaviour research closer to these challenges would increase the field's impact and global relevance, but most importantly, also contribute to addressing the challenges society faces.

This panel first addresses two broad questions:

1. What is the role and responsibility of information behaviour research in addressing major societal challenges?

The ultimate goal of information behaviour research is often framed as contributing to the development of better information systems or better and more fine-tuned models of human information behaviour in different contexts. However, information seeking is rarely done for its own sake, but to accomplish something beyond the act itself (e.g. Sundin & Johannisson, 2005). "Something" can be aspects of exactly those current major societal challenges described above. This question concerns if information behaviour researchers take on a more societal responsible role.

More weight into investigating this something might at the same time lead to less interest in a common conceptual framework of information behaviour. This leads to the second question raised in the panel discussion:

2. Is there a risk of jeopardising the conceptual coherence of the research field if information behaviour researchers to a greater extent direct their research to address major societal challenges?

This question concerns potential consequences of re-directing the research field towards addressing address major societal challenges, for example more interdisciplinary research. The question invites to a discussion on information behaviour as a field of research – what makes its researchers stick together, and how can the field be developed without losing sight of the urgent empirical phenomena we address in this panel.

Pannel members

Noora Hirvonen's research focuses on information practices of people in everyday life, specifically in health-related settings, and currently centers the ways artificial intelligence technologies mediate such practices. Hirvonen is an assistant professor in AI literacies at the University of Oulu in Finland and also holds the title of docent (reader) in health communication at the Faculty of Medicine at the same university.

Aylin Imeri 's research concentrates on activity tracking technology users in the last years. She investigated different aspects starting from acceptance and ease of use of those technologies up to the health information behaviour. She continues research about users' health information behaviour in everyday life and social media. Imeri is a research associate and postdoc at the Department of Information Science at the Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf in Germany.

Dirk Lewandowski's research focuses on information behaviour in commercial search engines and the societal impact of the predominant use of commercial search systems. Dirk has published extensively in the areas of web information retrieval, search engine user behaviour and the role that search engines play in society. He is a professor at Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Germany.

Ola Pilerot has researched a range of different topics in the field of information behaviour. In recent years, he has worked with issues concerning information practices of refugees and immigrants, in particular the role of public libraries for newly arrived immigrants. Pilerot is a professor at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science at the University of Borås, Sweden.

Olof Sundin has long experience researching a wide range of issues in the fields of information behaviour, health information, and literacy. In his forthcoming book (Haider & Sundin, in press), he relates information literacy and the changing information infrastructure to the current challenges of democracy. Olof Sundin is a professor in information studies at Lund University, Sweden. The panel includes five organisers from three countries, at different career stages, gender, and empirical focus.

Proposed format

The 90-minute panel will be highly interactive. It starts with a 5-minute introduction of the panelists and the overarching purpose of the panel by the moderator. Then each panelist presents their specific position to the questions posed above (5 minutes each). Each panelist's statement is followed by 5 minutes of questions from attendees and other panelists. The remaining 35 minutes are dedicated to a broader discussion on the theme. All attendees are encouraged to participate in the discussion first in small groups of 4-8 people and then sharing the key points of the group discussions with the larger audience.

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