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2011

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Citation for published version (APA):

Sundin, O. (2011). *From the periphery to the centre: some aspects regarding the future of information literacy research*. Abstract from Social Media and Information Practices Workshop.

Total number of authors:

1

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Position paper

From the periphery to the centre: some aspects regarding the future of information literacy research

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During the last decade, information literacy research has developed from a behaviouristic and constructivist tradition with strong professional orientation to a growing research field, which to an increasing extent also incorporates an awareness of sociocultural aspects. An interest in sociocultural aspects of information literacy in a broad and including sense is also something that unites not least researchers in a, what might be called, Nordic-Australian information literacy research community. These aspects have been explored in various theoretical positions. Empirically, information literacy research has never been so in line with contemporary questions as it is now with a focus on questions deriving from society's digitisation and medialisation. The empirical arenas for research have been broadened and include work life, everyday life and the educational sector (from pre-school to university level). The field has taken on the challenges posed by 'new' digital media. Methodologically, there has been a growing interest in qualitative methods in what might be called an ethnographic tradition among many information literacy research scholars. In institutional terms, there are well-developed collaborations between different academic departments. Furthermore, a large field of practitioners with an interest in the area, primarily from the library sector, exists. In other words, the research field of information literacy has been growing both in breadth and depth and during the last decade its research has gained momentum in its presence in scholarly journals and conferences within library and information studies.

At the same time, this narrative of research progress must be supplemented with some of the weaknesses of the field:

- Information literacy has different meanings in different theoretical approaches. This doesn't have to be a problem, but currently, when much of research is actually dedicated to define and establish *one* meaning, the field tends to be fragmented and without much communication between different research camps.
- As another consequence, article and conference manuscripts on information literacy are sometimes peer-reviewed by scholars working in a completely different theoretical tradition. That is, we believe we talk about the same 'thing', but we do not always understand each other.
- The field of information literacy was originally developed in the professional field of librarianship and accordingly the understanding of information literacy is often created within the professional practice. That is, there often exist strong normative assumptions.
- Information literacy research does not always relate to other literacy research (for instance within the field of New Literacy Research or New Literacies Research). For example, there is today a huge interest in digital literacy research that is of importance for the field of information literacy. That is, our impact on policy and research outside our own narrow realm is limited, yet unnecessarily so.
- Prominent scholars of information literacy research experience, with exceptions, still difficulties in attracting research funding from prestige funders. That is, we need to develop research ideas of interest also for other disciplines.

Together, the positive development of information literacy as a research field as well as the difficulties it still faces makes the direction of future research both exciting and important.

When we talk about information literacy, at least three levels of understanding of the combination of the two words can be found. First of all, information literacy can be used as a description of a research field that unites scholars from different departments and even different disciplines to work together. Let us talk about this understanding as an *institutional*

level of understanding of information literacy. Information literacy understood at an institutional level makes us come together and discuss important issues, for example in the forum of an information literacy research workshop in Borås. It invites us to send in manuscripts to special issues and to attend certain conferences. Secondly, there is an *empirical level of understanding* that concerns what kind of empirical phenomena we are actually interested in and investigate in our research. That could be anything from how students learn how to critically assess search engines to how employees learn the practices necessary for communicating and interacting at a workplace. Finally, there is a *theoretical understanding* of information literacy that strives to develop a theoretical lens for the field of research, i.e. how people learn information literacy. A theoretical understanding of information literacy often guides the empirical understanding of what can be regarded as information literacies. When the theoretical foundation of a research perspective is not considered or seen as the only one possible, the theoretical understanding makes discussions between different theoretical strands problematic.

The term 'information' in information literacy does sometimes obscure what we actually do research on. On the one hand, it is a generalised concept that risks hiding materiality (digital as well as physical). (As a consequence, it is sometimes possible to read an information literacy article without really understanding what it is about). On the other hand, by labelling our research as information literacy, we risk to fall outside the growing area of literacy research in general, and maybe digital literacy research in particular, which many of us are interested in and have a strong potential to contribute to. As a way forward, and this is a tentative thought, why do we not talk less about "information literacy" and focus more on what we actually research; the research questions we ask? In this way, the information literacy concept could be deflated in favour of a stronger focus on research questions that are also regarded as important outside the field of information literacy itself. On an institutional level, information literacy research is still what we are engaged in, yet we could more easily communicate this research to others.

Our disciplinary background makes some research questions possible and others less obviously relevant or at least less expected. One important empirical arena, out of many, for doing research is doubtless the ways digital environments become important part in our lives and how we give meaning to information in different practices. Our research tradition makes us very suited for the current multidisciplinary exploration of peoples' interaction in and with the web. At the same time as we avoid the trap of technological determinism, we need to take on board the many exciting research questions waiting to be asked. How can we understand the development of the Internet from a source of information to a place of being, from an information literacy scholar perspective? My own research experiences in the field of information literacy are primarily from the area of education. From that perspective, I am primarily interested in questions concerning how new digital media interplay with educational practices. Interesting research question could be, but are of course not limited to: How is knowledge configured, ascribed authority and communicated in the changing media ecology? What are the changing requirements for students as well as pedagogues of today? How can media, developed outside formal educational practices, be given meaning in schools and universities? How can a didactic for an increasingly digitised classroom be developed?

I will end this position paper with three questions, that I think, we as scholars should ask ourselves in order to advance contribution from information literacy scholars (with the *institutional level of understanding*) to the overall field of literacy studies. There is not one answer to these questions, but many and they should of course be supplemented with other ones:

- What kinds of research questions do we as information literacy scholars ask compared to scholars from other disciplines interested in literacy issues?
- How do we as information literacy scholars construct a research field at the same time as we communicate our research in ways that create an interest outside our research field?
- What are the interdisciplinary connections we could use in order to develop the impact of our research outside our research field?