

Information and Discourse

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The understandings and conceptualizations of information and information science vary. The term “information” is closely connected with the epistemological and ontological stances within particular scientific disciplines and paradigms (Machlup & Mansfield, 1983). Capurro and Hjørland (2003) observe that the understandings of information fluctuate between those that refer to molding matter and mind and those that refer to communicating knowledge. For library and information science the definitional and interpretive work around this term has become a means to achieve professionalization and the status of a discipline. Objects and processes that are also studied in other disciplines under different names of texts, documents, knowledge, or communication, become a legitimate part of information science once they are conceptualized as having something to do with information, i.e., described as something that needs to be stored, organized, retrieved disseminated, interpreted, and so on.

Even though information is one of the master concepts that is often applied unreflectively (Sholle, 1999), the use of other concepts can help to problematize the objects and processes characterized as information. One concept that has similar pervasive and all-embracing character is discourse. Depending on the discipline, discourse is used to define objects of studies, methodologies, or philosophical underpinnings and refers to multiple phenomena from linguistic units above the sentence level to manifestations and uses of language in relation to social phenomena (Schiffrin, 1994). The concept of discourse has already been employed in information science as part of conceptual and critical work. Frohmann (1994) proposed to look at the LIS talk from the discourse perspective and critically examine how specific conceptualizations of information and its uses come into being through certain material and social processes. Hjørland and Albrechtsen (1995) describe a novel approach to information science as the study of knowledge domains as discourse communities. Day (2001) relies on the concept of discourse in his analysis of the historical construction of knowledge as information.

Building on this tradition of employing the concept of discourse in the studies of information, this presentation asks the following question: Can the concept of discourse be used in the studies other than the uses and constructions of the word “information” and its derivatives? If information is conceptualized as having symbolic and social meanings produced within particular social contexts, it begins to converge with certain conceptualizations of discourse. Such convergent conceptualization already exists in the information science literature and it can be advanced further to highlight the complexity of modern means and genres of communication as well as study them from the perspective of discourse and related theories and methods.

In this presentation I will examine the existing definitions of information and discourse and argue for the importance of considering both in the studies of information. The core of my argument is that even though the increasing amounts of information call for quantification and automatic processing, the persisting problems of understanding and evaluating information call for careful analyses of the construction of meanings. Using the examples from my dissertation as well as from the research of others I will show that the analyses of meanings and contexts of information production can be enriched by employing the concept of discourse.

References

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