Information seeking behavior in epistemological light

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This session focus on epistemological issues related to information behavior. All presentations emphases the importances of an interpretative as well as a social approach to the investigation of information seeking and utilization.

What makes it possible to seek information?

Ian Cornelius

He explores the background conditions that make information seeking possible. The idea of information seeking assumes the social conditions that admit the collective concepts that give effect to the activity of seeking. These include the idealization of the discourse within which the dialogue of seeking must take place. The assumption of stable background conditions also
means we must assume the existence of a practice and of social conditions that make the search worthwhile, that there will be a continuing stable universe of social life that will make the results of the search worth having, that there will be a political discourse that allows the activity of seeking, and that there is a historical context that creates and gives value to the information that might be sought and makes it accessible. Within these social conditions there is the micro discourse where the individual information seeker engages with their own sense of identity, their sense of the future, and their context. Models of information seeking are just possible entailments of these background conditions but always limited by them. We can construct what the background conditions might be by constructive interpretation.

**Interpretative practices and interpretation of practices - hermeneutics as an epistemological problem in LIS**  
*Joacim Hansson*

Hermeneutics has become increasingly used as an analytical toolkit within the LIS community during the last decade. At the same time many of the practices studied within LIS are described as hermeneutic or interpretative. The equivalence of these views on hermeneutics is questioned in an epistemological discussion that relate to the general scientific nature of LIS as a "modern" or "postmodern" science.

**Epistemologies as (normative) theories of information seeking and use**  
*Birger Hjørland*

People tend, of course, to use the information that they consider beneficial and worthwhile. How do beliefs of this kind develop in human beings? Most research in information science has focused on the study of psychological preferences rather than considering the collective development of knowledge. Humankind has made some common experiences, which are communicated to the single individuals, directly or indirectly. Most of us have learned to trust medical science for information about health issues (even if some people mistrust medical science and uses alternative sources). The general theories about how valid and useful knowledge is produced (or should be produced) are epistemological theories. Classical epistemological theories were empiricism and rationalism. More recent theories are related to historicism and pragmatism, respectively. Any epistemological theory will (if it is clearly formulated) provide normative criteria for, which information sources should be preferred, not only in science, but also in everyday life.
The claim of this presentation is thus that explanations of people’s use of information should basically be found by examining the epistemological views that people have. The most stable patterns in people’s use of information is an expression of an implicit epistemological theory. Epistemological knowledge is necessary if library and information science is going to help people identify the information they need.

**The instrumentality of information seeking**

*Olof Sundin*

Information-seeking never is carried out for its own sake. Instead we need to ask for what purpose information is sought; information seeking, no matter from which approach it is studied, has an epistemological character that can be described in terms of the instrumentality of information seeking. How we implicitly or explicitly regard the instrumentality of information seeking has bearing on how we use concept such as information needs, relevance and, hence, the concept of information itself. In this presentation, the epistemological position of neo-pragmatism is introduced. Such an epistemology states that knowledge (or information) does not represent anything in themselves, instead they are just tools that people use instrumentally in order to deal with their social worlds. An important effect from such anti-representationalist view of knowledge is that knowledge claims are neither to be valued against an external reality nor against the cognitive structure of individual subjects, but within different communities of justification. In order to understand concepts such as information need and relevance we must pay attention to how these communities of justification are a result of competing societal interests.