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Book Review

Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior. Donald O. Case. San Diego, CA: Academic Press: 2002. 350 pp. Price: \$89.95. (ISBN: 0-12-150381-X.)

Donald O. Case has written an ambitious book to create an overall picture of the major approaches to information needs and seeking (INS) studies. The aim to write an extensive review is reflected in the list of references containing about 700 items. The high ambitions are explained on p. 14, where Case states that he is aiming at a multidisciplinary understanding of the concept of information seeking. In the Preface, the author characterizes his book as an introduction to the topic for students at the graduate level, as well as as a review and handbook for scholars engaged in information behavior research.

In my view, *Looking for Information* is particularly welcome as an academic textbook because the field of INS studies suffers from the lack of monographs. Along with the continuous growth of the number of journal articles and conference papers, there is a genuine need for a book that picks up the numerous pieces and puts them together. The use of the study as a textbook is facilitated by clearly delineated sections on major themes and the wealth of concrete examples of information seeking in everyday contexts. The book is lucidly written and it is accessible to novice readers, too.

At first glance, the idea of providing a comprehensive review of INS studies may seem a mission impossible because the current number of articles, papers, and other contributions in this field is nearing the 10,000 range (p. 224). Donald Case is not alone in the task of coming to grips with an increasing number of studies; similar problems have been faced by those writing INS-related chapters for the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology (ARIST).

Case has solved the problem of "too many publications to be reviewed" by concentrating on the INS literature published during the last two decades. Secondly, studies on library use and information retrieval are discussed only to a limited extent. In addition, Case is highly selective as to studies focusing on the use of specific sources and channels such as WWW. These delineations are reasonable, even though they beg some questions. First, how should one draw the line between studies on information seeking and information retrieval? Case does not discuss this question in greater detail, although in recent years, the overlapping areas of information seeking and retrieval studies have been broadened, along with the growing importance of WWW in information seeking/retrieval. Secondly, how can one define the concept of information searching (or, more specifically, Internet or Web searching) in relation to information seeking and information retrieval? In the field of Web searching studies, there is an increasing number of contributions that are of direct relevance to information-seeking studies. Clearly, the advent of the Internet, particularly, the Web, has blurred the previous lines between INS and IR literature, making them less clear cut.

The book consists of five main sections, and comprises 13 chapters. There is an Appendix serving the needs of an INS textbook (questions for discussion and application). The structure of the book is meticulously planned and, as a whole, it offers a sufficiently balanced contribution to theoretical, methodological, and empirical issues of INS. The title, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior* aptly describes the main substance of the book.

The first section of the book is of an introductory nature. Chapter 1 provides the background and clarifies the major focus. Chapter 2 serves novice readers by offering a realistic introduction to the complex phenomena of everyday information seeking. Examples of varying information needs and seeking practices associated, for example, with buying a car are depicted in an appealing way. As Case points out on pp. 6–7, the book will emphasize people rather than formal information systems. Thus, the author adopts a person-oriented viewpoint to information seeking, following the mainstream of INS philosophy since the 1990s.

Another key to the book is closely related to the standpoint stated previously. Case brings to the fore the "ten myths about information and information seeking" discussed by Brenda Dervin in 1976. Case subscribes to Dervin's critique of the myths such as "only objective information is valuable" or "time and space—individual situations—can be ignored in addressing information seeking and use." Even though Case sympathizes with the alternative ideas of information and information seeking suggested by Sense-Making theory, the book should not be seen to have been solely inspired by this approach. In fact, the author takes critical distance from Sense-Making theory by pointing out in the concluding chapter that "life is not all about uncertainty, gaps, or discontinuities . . . the sense-making approach, while still valuable, does not capture all aspects of information behavior" (pp. 290–291). For some reason, Case does not explicate his ontological or epistemological position in greater detail, that is, the viewpoint from which he approached the INS literature. Given the primary aim of the book, that is, to provide an overview of the wide spectrum of INS studies, the adoption of the role of an "impartial observer" is understandable. Standing back from specific meta-theoretical positions such as constructivism or the cognitive viewpoint may yield a greater degree of freedom to interpret the research material. On the other hand, keeping one's own viewpoint implicit may make it more difficult to give specific reasons for critical judgments when assessing the significance of various INS theories, models, and paradigms.

Major concepts relevant to information behavior are discussed in Section 2. First, a wide array of interpretations of the concept of information is presented. For example, the conceptions developed by Bateson, Buckland, Dervin, and Shannon and Weaver are reviewed (Chapter 3). Even though the analysis of these conceptions does not go particularly deep, the chapter is helpful as an overview revealing the wide variety of definitions of information. To characterize the concept on a general level, Case utilizes the often quoted definition formulated by Gregory Bateson: [information is] "any difference that makes a difference" (p. 40). Case suggests that in the context of reviewing INS studies, it is practical not to favor any more specific definition of information. It is better to conceive of information as a "primitive term," which may be

interpreted according to the requirements of each context in which it appears. This may be seen as too easy a compromise, but again, given the aims of the study, the strategy adopted by Case is reasonable. Obviously, any more precise definition of information would have limited the scope of the book, which is intended to review a broad spectrum of investigations having to do with information seeking.

The problems associated with defining the concepts of need and information need are discussed in Chapter 4. Although the chapter is short, it succeeds in shedding light on the entangled issues of needs, wants, demands, and motivations. Throughout the history of INS studies, the concept of information need has seemed to be one that most strongly defies exact definition. On the other hand, the conceptions of human needs developed by psychologists have not been particularly helpful, due to their unspecific nature; we may mention here, for example, Maslow's typology or the theory of cognitive dissonance. The setting is further complicated in that there is a number of related concepts standing for the "triggers" of information seeking, for example, discrepancy, uncertainty, and task or problem at hand. Case has succeeded quite well in summarizing the main findings of research focusing on information needs. However, there are some omissions, for example, Bryce Allen's paper on Information Needs: A Person-in-Situation Approach, presented at the 1st Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) Conference in Tampere, Finland, 1996. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that, in this chapter, the main attention is devoted to classic contributions such as the typology of visceral, conscious, formalized, and compromised needs (Taylor), the anomalous state of knowledge (Belkin), and gap (Dervin).

Compared to the space devoted to the issues of information need, the concepts of information seeking and information behavior are discussed quite briefly. Like information, information seeking is perceived "as a taken-for-granted concept, a catchall phrase that encompasses a variety of behaviors seemingly motivated by the recognition of missing information" (p. 76). Such a definition provides a working compromise as a general level characterization. However, the value of this chapter would have been enhanced by scrutinizing these concepts in more detail by comparing information behavior to information searching and learning? Moreover, the relationship between information seeking and information use is not discussed. Even though the book focuses on information needs and seeking, the issues of information use (or utilization) are relevant in this context: what is "done" by information being sought or received? Obviously, the processes of seeking and use overlap when the relevance of information is assessed. Further, the relationships between information behavior and information action have not been considered in the book. At least, it would have been intriguing to discuss in greater detail why "behavior" was preferred over "action" as a major concept. The compound of "information behavior" is not without problems, because we may think that information per se does not "behave" in the same sense as people do. Thus, alternative expressions such as "information-related behavior" would be more appropriate.

To put information seeking in a broader context, Case scrutinizes some related concepts (Chapter 5). Among them are decision making, problem solving, browsing, and relevance. Given the limited space, these topics are discussed in an introductory way only. Relating the processes of problem solving and information seeking is a central point of departure when exploring the issues of task-based information seeking. Due to its introductory nature, the book does not go deeper into the issues of this type of INS research or discuss, for example, the relationship between task complexity and information seeking. At a similar level of generality, the book offers a useful introduction to central issues of browsing and relevance. A recent monograph entitled *Accessing and Browsing: Information and Communication*, by Ronald E. Rice, Maureen McCreadie, and Shan-Ju L. Chang (MIT Press, 2001) has not been included in the review, probably due to the concurrent publishing

processes. What is most original is the presentation of less often researched topics such as information avoiding or the relationship between entertainment and information seeking. Case criticizes the bias of INS studies, preferring to perceive people primarily as thinking beings and to overrationalize human behavior. However, no sharp distinctions may be drawn between information and entertainment because many people have, for example, needs for pleasure reading. As the border between information and entertainment becomes more blurred, researchers of everyday life information seeking will face new challenges when studying, for example, the meanings people attach to surfing the Web.

One of the sections is devoted to models, paradigms, and theories in the study of information behavior. Chapter 6 presents five general models of information seeking developed by T.D. Wilson (1981, 1996), J. Krikelas (1983), J.D. Johnson (1997), G. Leckie et al. (1996). Of these, the Wilson and Leckie et al. models are probably the most widely known among INS researchers. One may wonder why Kuhlthau's Information Search Process (ISP) model is not discussed in this context because ISP can be classified among the most influential contributions to recent INS research. According to Case (pp. 115–116), ISP was excluded due to the need to focus on general models applicable in multiple contexts, occupations, roles, and knowledge domains. However, under closer consideration, it is difficult to see why ISP does not meet these criteria. More generally, given the influence of the ISP model on recent INS research, Kuhlthau's model might have merited more detailed attention in the book. Compared to ISP, Krikelas model seems to have less impact on INS studies. Although widely cited, the Krikelas model is not a felicitous example in this context because it contains poorly specified components such as "information giving."

The picture given by general models is specified by discussing selected theories and paradigms that have affected INS research for decades. There is a number of models in INS studies as indicated here, but the question whether there are also specific theories of information seeking is more demanding. By applying rigorous criteria, there seems to be no empirically validated theories of INS so far. By less stringent criteria, the contributions of Elfreda Chatman would seem to meet the basic requirements of a theory. By the same criteria, we may speculate that the ISP model is developing toward a theory. Considering the perspectives of developing genuine INS theories, Chapter 7 is highly interesting because it discusses various conceptions that have been accorded the status of a theory, for example, the uses and gratifications approach in communication studies. Interestingly, Case also discusses other sources of theory in information seeking, for example, Zipf's Principle of Least Effort or the ideas of cognitive science.

In this context, the role of Sense-Making theory methodology is also commented upon. Unfortunately, Case interprets Sense-Making in ways that do not do full justice to the recent developments in this methodology. On p. 147, the author claims that "the core of the sense-making research could be said to derive from the philosophy and learning theory of John Dewey. . . sense-making has incorporated Dewey, Kelly and Bruner's notions of life as an encounter with problems and discontinuities in knowledge, and also the view that information is something we create through our interactions with the obstacles in our progress through life . . . it is an active, process-oriented view of learning and being." This interpretation is biased because it draws on the writings of early Sense-Making research only. However, if we read Dervin's recent articles carefully, for example, "On Studying Information Seeking Methodologically: The Implications of Connecting Metatheory to Method," published in *Information Processing and Management* in 1999, it becomes clear that this conclusion is excessively simple. In her recent writings, Dervin emphasizes that the Sense-Making metaphor is metatheoretical and methodological. As a metatheory, she posits Sense-Making as a "verbing approach." This means that instead of focusing on elusive, ever-changing, and

constantly challenged nouns, Sense-Making mandates a focus on the "hows" of the human individual and collective sense-making and sense-unmaking. Thus, by emphasizing the "hows," Sense-Making posits the gappiness of the human condition as a methodological tool, not as literally interpreted life-facing and problem-meeting *per se*.

Section Four of the book characterizes the basic features of the research process and gives some examples of the ways in which various methods have been applied in empirical INS studies. Chapter 8, "The Research Process," is in the nature of an introduction, mainly serving the needs of graduate students preparing their research proposals on INS topics. The next chapter appeals to a wider readership because it deals with the specific issues of doing empirical INS research. Illuminating examples are provided of the utilization of case studies, experiments, surveys, brief and intensive interviews, focus group interviews, diaries and experience sampling, historical and content analyses, and so-called meta-analysis. The empirical examples are useful in that they not only provide detailed descriptions of various kinds of research settings, but also assess the strengths and weaknesses of different methods. Case devotes attention to the importance of multiple methods in the gathering of empirical data. This emphasis is in line with recent developments because the popularity of multiple methods seems to be increasing. For example, the papers presented at the 4th ISIC Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, September 2002 were indicative in this respect.

The final section of the book discusses the major research results of INS studies and reflects the state-of-the-art of the research field. Case has solved problem of "too many empirical findings to be reviewed" by using three heuristic guidelines: (i) focus on investigations that discuss information seeking in the context of occupations, roles, or demographic groups (ii) eliminate studies that orient toward general education or information systems (for example, the use of the Internet), and (iii) prefer more recent investigations (Post, 1990).

These criteria are reasonable, and in Chapters 11 and 12, Case has succeeded very well in characterizing the research settings and key findings of empirical INS studies. Information seeking by occupation is exemplified by groups such as engineers and scientists, health care providers, managers, and journalists. Given the history of INS studies, this focus is understandable because the informants of most investigations have been recruited from these groups. Interestingly, references are also made to the information-seeking practices of more exotic groups, for example, artists and the clergy. As Chapters 12 shows, there is number of studies reviewing information seeking in the context of social roles such as citizen, voter, consumer, and patient. Most of these studies can be located in the area of everyday information seeking. The same applies to INS studies grouped by demographic factors, for example, age. Case is well-versed in the literature of everyday information seeking, and it is pleasing to note that attention is also paid to the classic studies on citizen information seeking conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by Dervin and Chatman.

The concluding chapters often invoke specific expectations: is the author able to rise above the conventional summary view and are there fresh ideas on how to develop the research field? At least for those who have attended the ISIC conferences since 1996, Case's concluding remarks offer no major surprises. Case returns to the "ten myths" about information and demonstrates that, by and large, the findings of INS research conducted since the 1980s have ruined the myths of objective information or context-free informa-

tion seeking. Obviously, the INS research community has heard the call for user-centered research by Brenda Dervin and Michael Nilan in the widely quoted ARIST chapter in 1986. More generally, Case emphasizes the innovative role of the Sense-Making approach, which he sees as "probably the single most obvious way that our view of information seeking has changed" (p. 288). According to Case, INS research is "... now more focused on the phenomenology of sense-making than the ways that a particular source or channel of information is used by its intended audience" (p. 282). Furthermore, there is a shift "in theoretical orientation toward more phenomenological and contextual and hermeneutic approaches and by more qualitative emphasis" (p. 286). In this context, the role of the ambiguous qualifier "phenomenological" has been emphasized too strongly, but otherwise it is easy to agree with the conclusions stated here.

In the last pages of his book, Case presents some intriguing comments on the development of INS studies. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the research frameworks were developed as a steady stream of "complaints and remedies" and, quite often, references were made to "defective methodology" used in empirical settings. Having established itself on a firmer methodological footing in the 1980s, INS research began to grow, but at the same time, the problem of fragmentation became more evident. Along with specialization, new samples of different occupational or other groups were surveyed. However, as Case rightly notes, a considerable number of empirical findings have remained self-contained, thus not contributing to the advancement of INS theories or the accumulation of comparable results.

It is easy to agree with Case about the significance of the problem of specialization and fragmentation. This problem seems to be concomitant with the broadening field of INS research. In itself, Case's book can be interpreted as a struggle against this fragmentation. His book suggests that this struggle is not hopeless and that it is still possible to draw an overall picture of the evolving research field. The major pieces of the puzzle were found and the book will provide a useful overview of INS studies for many years.

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