

Chapter 13

Contextual Factors Influencing Information Seeking Behavior of Social Scientists: A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

Many researchers in the area of information seeking behavior have highlighted the importance of context in influencing information-seeking behavior. However, few have elaborated on how contextual factors influence information-seeking in practice. This chapter explores the impact of disciplinary traditions of non-western, developing country external environments on patterns of information seeking and retrieval. Conditions that influence information seeking behaviors of social science scholars in non-western, developing countries impact research traditions, publication patterns, and subsequent formats are examined. This chapter draws on existing literature to examine the impact of contextual factors on information seeking by social science scholars as well as, on relevant findings based on research with other categories of researchers. The chapter concludes that there is substantial evidence from previous research to indicate the importance of contextual factors in influencing the information-seeking behavior of social scientists. Some of these factors are related to the nature of social science as a domain of study, while others are related to researcher's external environment, including constraints on the availability of particular types of information.

INTRODUCTION

Many researchers in the area of information seeking behavior have highlighted the importance of context in influencing information-seeking behavior. However, few have elaborated on how

contextual factors influence information-seeking in practice. Wilson, who developed one of the earliest models of information seeking, later acknowledged that his 1981 model paid insufficient attention to contextual factors. He writes “the limitation of this kind of model, however, is that

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it does little more than provide a map of the area and draw attention to gaps in research: it provides no suggestion of causative factors in information [behavior] and, consequently, it does not directly suggest hypotheses to be tested” (Wilson, 1999, p. 251).

Although Wilson and others have taken steps to incorporate contextual factors into their models of information seeking, this is still an area in which there are gaps in understanding, and as a result no comprehensive theory of information seeking has yet been developed which can be readily applied to different contextual situations, such as different disciplinary groups or geographical or cultural environments. More modeling is therefore necessary in order to advance our understanding of information seeking. As Bates (2005) noted, “Models are most useful at the description and prediction stages of understanding a phenomenon. Only when we develop an explanation for a phenomenon can we properly say we have a theory. Consequently, most of theory in LIS is really still at the modeling stage” (Bates, 2005).

In order to investigate the role of contextual factors on information seeking, this chapter discusses relevant findings from previous studies and explores the impact of disciplinary traditions of non-western, developing country external environments on patterns of information seeking and retrieval. Specifically, the following issues are addressed:

1. Research traditions and the publication patterns and formats and their impacts on the social science scholars information seeking.
2. Conditions influence information seeking behaviors of social science scholars in non-western, developing countries.

In discussing these issues, this paper also highlights the ways in which the technological information environment has undergone dramatic changes since the earlier models of information seeking were developed, and how this is having a

major impact on patterns of information-seeking, although perhaps to a greater or lesser extent for different categories of researchers. This study focuses specifically on the impact of contextual factors on information seeking by social science scholars, but also draws on relevant findings based on research with other categories of researchers where these are particularly significant.

RESEARCH TRADITIONS AND THE PUBLICATION PATTERNS AND FORMATS

Many earlier studies found that although there were some differences between researchers of different disciplines in their information-seeking behavior, there were also many similarities (e.g., APA, INFROSS, cited in Brittain, 1984; Ellis, Cox & Hall, 1993; Folster, 1989; Romanos de Tiratel, 2000; Ellis & Haugan, 1997).

In the 1970s, a major program of research conducted at Bath University, as in Brittain (1984), in the UK investigated the information-seeking behaviors of social science scholars and practitioners. Often referred to simply as ‘The Bath Studies’, the Investigation into Information Requirements of the Social Sciences (INFROSS) and the Design of Information Systems in the Social Sciences (DISISS) were the first major studies conducted from an Information Science perspective which aimed to determine social science user requirements in terms of library and information services. However, the current practical relevance of findings from the Bath studies is very limited, since the studies were conducted long before the information-seeking environment was transformed by the development and widespread use of electronic resources, particularly the Internet.

Ellis and Haugan (1997), who conducted a study of the research activities of engineers and research scientists at Statoil’s Research Center in Norway, were able to readily map the engineers’ and scientists’ information-seeking activities to the

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