Chapter 7

The Theory of Information Worlds and Information Behaviour

Gary Burnett and Paul T. Jaeger

Abstract

This chapter details the theory of information worlds and its relation to studies of information behaviour, providing a framework for examining information behaviour in a variety of settings. Since information and its related technologies impact every aspect of life in advanced societies, it is of great importance to create a stronger theoretical understanding of information behaviours across social contexts. Information behaviour is simultaneously shaped by immediate influences, such as friends, family and other trusted small world sources, and by larger social influences, including public sphere institutions, media, technology and politics. Information behaviours of all sorts are situated and contextualized, given meaning by the multi-tiered contexts within which they occur. Drawing on the works of Jürgen Habermas, who studied information flow across the largest social structures, and Elfreda Chatman, who focused on the smallest social units, the theory explores information behaviour across all of the levels — the small worlds of everyday life, mediating social institutions and technologies, the concerns of an entire society and broad political and economic forces. After detailing antecedents and exploring the theory’s core concepts, the chapter investigates the theory’s relevance for research on information behaviour and
discusses the theory in light of other approaches to studying information behaviour, arguing that it provides a strong foundation for understanding and analysing the complex interwoven contexts within which we interact with information.

7.1. Introduction

This chapter details the theory of information worlds and its relation to the study of information behaviour. The theory of information worlds provides a framework by which to examine the social dimensions and uses of information simultaneously at the immediate and broader social levels. This theory has been designed to bridge the gaps between the ways in which information is viewed in terms of small social units and the ways in which it is viewed in larger societal and political processes. Since information and accompanying information technologies underlie virtually every aspect of life in technologically advanced societies, creating stronger theoretical connections between information behaviour in the various levels of society is of great importance. The theory asserts that the information behaviour of individuals is shaped simultaneously by immediate influences, such as friends, family, co-workers and trusted information sources within the small worlds in which individuals live, as well as by larger social influences including public sphere institutions, media, technology and politics. The framework provided by this theory can be used to examine the contexts of information at the micro (small worlds), meso (intermediate) and macro-(the lifeworld) levels of society. These levels, though distinct, are intimately interrelated.

Though the theory of information worlds draws upon work from a wide range of disciplines and ties together elements of many social theories, the largest contributors to the foundation of the theory are the theoretical works of Jürgen Habermas and Elfreda Chatman. Habermas was interested in the largest social structures, while Chatman was most interested in the smallest social units. In contrast, the theory of information worlds explores information behaviour in terms of all of the intertwined levels of society — the small worlds of everyday life, the mediating social institutions, the concerns of an entire society and the political and economic forces that shape society — levels that constantly shape, interact with, and reshape one another. The theory of information worlds allows a richer understanding of the intersections between information and the many different cultural contexts within which it is used, from the macro to the micro. The theory of information worlds can serve as a theoretical driver both in LIS studies and across disciplines, aiming to enrich and expand our understandings of information behaviour and the multi-layered roles of information in society. Building on the explorations of the theory in
Jaeger and Burnett (2010), this chapter focuses specifically on the information behaviour aspects of the theory of information worlds. The chapter details the foundational theories, explores the core concepts of the theory and discusses its relevance to information behaviour research.

7.2. Theoretical Foundations of Information Worlds

Information theorist Elfreda Chatman worked throughout her career to develop a series of theoretical positions related to the place of information in the context of the everyday lives of definable localized social groupings of people, which she termed small worlds. Much of Chatman’s early work focused on worlds specifically in settings constrained by socio-economic poverty as well as limited access to formal information resources (Chatman, 1991, 1992, 1999, 2000). However, the concept of the small world is, ultimately, neither evaluative nor absolutely yoked to poverty, whether socio-economic or informational. As a concept, it is neither negative nor positive, but rather descriptive, acknowledging the ‘small’ field of concerns and interests that are active in specific social settings and the predictability and routines of day-to-day life within those settings (Thompson, 2006, 2008). A small world, whether it is geographically and economically constrained or enjoys access to a wealth of information resources, is small in the sense that its day-to-day activities and interests are structured and defined by a recognizable set of social norms and behaviours that are specific to the localized context of the world itself.

Small worlds, then, can be defined as the social environments in which an inter-connected group of individuals live and work, bonded together by common interests, expectations and behaviours, and often by economic status and geographic (or ‘virtual’) proximity as well (Burnett, Besant, & Chatman, 2001). In these worlds, individuals may share similar opinions and concerns; similarly, the interests and activities of individuals are deeply influenced by the normative pressures of the small world as a whole (Chatman, 1999). Within each small world, everyday activities, including activities related to information, are thus considered to be the way things are, and are frequently taken for granted as being standard across all small worlds, even when they are unique to a specific group. Chatman’s conceptualization of the small world is useful in that it explicitly accounts for the different ways in which people engage with and behave in relation to information in the context of their social interactions. While she presented several versions of the concept, the fullest account is to be found in her theory of normative behaviour, presented late in her life (Burnett et al., 2001; Chatman, 2000).
Chatman's theoretical work is particularly useful for the ways in which it conceptualizes the place of information within specific localized small worlds. Chatman's approach fits well with other disciplines' findings regarding the values placed on information. Studies in sociology and psychology indicate that individuals experience culture as fragments of information but that culture also serves to give structure to the fragments of information (DiMaggio, 1997; Martin, 1992). Among these fragments, people are more likely to recall information correctly and efficiently if it fits within their established cultural frameworks (DiMaggio, 1997). Chatman's findings about the uses of information in social contexts are also reflected in studies in other fields. A series of studies of government agricultural agents in rural Africa, for example, found that agents who presented the information they were distributing in a manner that accounted for the highly localized beliefs of the farmers were far more successful than other agents at getting new agricultural practices adopted and implemented (Woods, 1993).

However, because it draws such tight circles around small worlds and rarely looks at information beyond those boundaries, Chatman's work does not adequately consider interactions between small worlds and the broader society within which they exist, nor does it account for interactions across and between multiple small worlds. Not only do individuals, as they move between different parts of their lives — from neighborhood to work to shopping, for instance — encounter many different norms and behaviours but they are also subject, in many cases, to forces and influences from outside of the specific localized world they inhabit at any one time. As Truman (1971, p. 509) has noted, 'no tolerably normal person is totally absorbed in any group in which he participates. The diversity of an individual's experiences and his attendant interests involve him in a variety of actual and potential groups'. By contrast, the work of Jürgen Habermas, and particularly his concept of the lifeworld, focuses almost exclusively on the social world and its information resources in a much broader context.

While the influence of Chatman's ideas has largely been limited to the world of information studies, Habermas has been widely influential across many disciplines, spawning a considerable body of secondary literature (Alejandro, 1993; Clark, 2000; Zaref, 2000). Scholars in fields as diverse as political science, communication, public policy, cultural studies and education have explored the ramifications of his ideas for their disciplines, including the concepts of the public sphere, lifeworlds and ideal speech situations. In information studies, however, Habermas' work has not been widely examined; those writers who have considered his ideas have, for the most part, used them in discussions of users of libraries, of staff and managers of libraries or of the operational context of libraries (Buschman, 2006; Wiegand, 2005). Although his ideas have important implications for understanding the place of information within culture and society, their
significance for issues related to information behaviour remains largely unexplored.

Central to Habermas’ work is the concept of the public sphere, an idealized ‘space within a society’, essential to the functioning of a democracy, which is ‘independent both of state power and/or corporate influence, within which information can freely flow and debate on matters of public, civic concern can openly proceed’ (Corner, 1995, p. 42). Habermas’ writings detail the exchange of information in the larger social and political processes of a society in relation to public institutions and forums, where democracy is not possible without public participation and critique, and this participation has to occur in public forums to be truly effective (Habermas, 1984, 1989, 1992, 1996). In Habermas’ scheme, topics of concern within the public sphere are those of social and political consequence for society as a whole as well as for individuals. An active public sphere, thus, functions as an important link between the members of a democratic society and the government.

Habermas conceived of the ‘authority of opinion’ in the public sphere as a ‘precondition’ for true liberal democracy (Zaref, 2000, pp. 21–22). The locales and communication channels of the public sphere — the public press, forums, schools, libraries and other settings — not only make free discourse about social and political information possible but also function as mediators between the rights of the individual and the power of the state in democratic societies. For the public sphere to successfully support the exchange of information necessary for a healthy democracy, it must feature open communication, information access and information exchange (Burnett & Jaeger, 2008). In such a sphere, people are able to interact freely with one another; to gain access to authoritative and reliable information resources; and to openly exchange information between and among each other, independent of formal and official channels of communication and information distribution such as the mass media and governmental information services (Murdock & Golding, 1989).

However, limitations to the power of the public sphere have emerged from governmental actions designed to limit the access and exchange of social and political information in some social settings (Ewen, 1996; Hiebert, 2003; Jaeger, 2007; Jaeger & Burnett, 2005), as well as from rapid increases in mass media control of communication channels (Hiebert, 2005; Nerone, 1994; Starr, 2004). The impact of such limitations on the information behaviour of social groups and individuals remains largely unexplored.

Closely related to the public sphere — and key for the discussion at hand — is Habermas’ concept of the information lifeworld, which can be defined as ‘the whole ensemble of human relations which is coordinated and reproduced’ through communication practices and information exchange (Brand, 1990, p. xii). Unlike the strictly localized small scale of Chatman’s concept of the small world, Habermas’ lifeworld is expansive, reaching across a broad swath of a culture: ‘members of a social collective normally share a
lifeworld' (Habermas, 1992, p. 109). A lifeworld, then, is that collective
information and social environment that weaves together the diverse
information resources, voices and perspectives of all of the members of a
society. In this increasingly technologically mediated information envi-
ronment, the lifeworld can be seen as the totality of communication and in-
formation options and outlets available culture wide. It is a dizzying array,
a mass of traditional and new media, channels and services, comprising
Television and radio, news and entertainment, blogs and supermarket bulletin
boards, virtual communities and much more. It encompasses the full range of
such resources. The concept of the lifeworld does not focus, unlike Chatman's
concept of the small world, on the specifics and contextual aspects of localized
communities. To Chatman's necessary little picture, it provides the equally
necessary big picture.

Habermas believed the public sphere aspired to be a conversation among
equals rather than a hegemonic tool. The strength of the public sphere 'lies in
the presumption of reason, the human ability to define and solve problems'
(Boeder, 2005, n. p.). The negative turn of political actors successfully stifling
the public sphere represents a serious and pressing challenge to the public
sphere, but it does not undermine the potential power it can have in
deliberations about social and political issues. While hegemonic elements of
societies tend to try to enforce a dominant or common culture, every society is
in fact comprised of many different cultures, just as the lifeworld is comprised
of many different small worlds (Williams, 1958, 1968). So long as societies
encompass a range of cultures — a range of small worlds — the public sphere
will be a viable concept.

The concepts of both Chatman and Habermas are useful tools for analysing
the social and political contexts of information behaviour. However, each is
problematic when taken in isolation. Chatman rarely considers whatever
other worlds are to be found outside of a specific small world, whether the
broader social context within which a small world exists or other small worlds,
even when those multiple worlds come into contact with one another; Habermas, conversely, does not investigate how the broader lifeworld
might be instantiated within or might interact with localized contexts and
specific communities (Burnett & Jaeger, 2008). However, social contexts and
information behaviour are not isolated from one another.

7.3. Components of Information Worlds

The theory of information worlds is designed to provide a framework through
which the multiple interactions between information, information behaviour
and the many different social contexts within which it exists — from the
individual to the social group to the society — can be understood and studied (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). The theory posits that information behaviour is shaped simultaneously by both immediate influences, such as friends, family, co-workers and trusted information sources of the small worlds in which individuals live, as well as larger social influences, including public sphere institutions, media, technology and politics. These levels, though separate, do not function in isolation, and to ignore any level in examining information behaviour results in an incomplete picture of the social contexts of information. Explorations of information behaviour must account for the different levels to fully understand the social drivers of information behaviour and the uses of information in society. The theory of information worlds attempts to account for all of these social and structural elements at work in the shaping of information behaviour within a society.

While it draws its conception of small worlds from Chatman and its conception of the broader lifeworld from Habermas, the theory of information worlds also acknowledges that there are intermediate worlds, which can mediate or intervene between the macro and the micro. For instance, in the contexts of formal institutions and corporate life, researchers in the field of ‘new institutionalism’ argue that there is a ‘meso’ or organizational level that establishes and enforces norms within institutional contexts, and that also translates or contextualizes macro-level norms and information resources for use within the small worlds of an institution (DiMaggio, 1997; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Just as small worlds and the lifeworld can be conceptualized independently, ‘organizations have an autonomy both from the societal structures in which they are located and from the individuals who compose them’ (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 241). However, the theory of information worlds suggests that there are interactions between all of these levels — small worlds exist within a broader lifeworld context, which influences them, just as the lifeworld itself can be influenced by specific small worlds; intermediate levels can interact with both.

7.4. Information Access and Information Behaviour

A pillar of the theory of information worlds is that there are three levels of access to information and information technology — physical access, intellectual access and social access (Burnett, Jaeger & Thompson, 2008). Physical access to information is generally viewed as access to the document or other form of embodying information, be it conveyed through print, electronic, verbal or another means of communication — literally the process of getting to the information that is being sought (Svenonius, 2000).
The vast majority of discourse on information access tends to focus on physical issues, such as the physical or electronic structures that contain information, and the physical or digital paths that are traveled to get to information (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). While it is a necessary prerequisite, mere physical access is not sufficient for full access: 'it is a common, but mistaken, assumption that access to technology equals access to information' (McCreadie & Rice, 1999, p. 51). The ability of a user to get to information and the ability of that user to employ information to accomplish particular goals are very different (Culnan, 1983, 1984, 1985).

The next level of access is intellectual access — the ability to understand the information. Intellectual access can be understood as the accessing of the information itself after physical access has been obtained (Svenonius, 2000). Intellectual access to information ‘entails equal opportunity to understand intellectual content and pathways to that content’ (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005, p. 68). Issues of intellectual access involve understanding how the information is presented to people seeking information, as well as the impact of such presentation on the process of information seeking; intellectual access to information includes the means through which the information is categorized, organized, displayed and represented.

The theory of information worlds argues that social access is the third necessary level of access to information — the ability to communicate and use the information in social contexts (Burnett et al., 2008). Such social contexts can range from personal communication for entertainment purposes to educational and work settings to democratic participation. Gaining and understanding information without the ability to communicate that information prevents social engagement through the information. People also have a stronger sense of community and belonging in situations in which they can exchange information in social contexts (Johnson, 2010; Williamson & Roberts, 2010). Social access is now heavily dependent on information technologies for communication in many contexts. Social access depends on an individual user’s attitudes towards information technologies, on the ability of the user to employ information technologies to engage in social interactions, and on the user’s understanding and acceptance of the social norms and mores surrounding information in a particular social world.

Thus far, the focus on online access in the United States and elsewhere has almost exclusively been devoted to concerns of physical access. This focus on physical access carries through to both information and information technologies. As a result, training materials to assist developers in the creation of information technologies also reflect this strong bias towards physical access (Law, Jaeger, & McKay, 2010). For social equality to be achieved in access to information technologies, research and development needs to place greater emphasis on achieving intellectual and
social access to information and information technologies, Internet-enabled and beyond. This emphasis depends on a better understanding of information behaviour in the online environment.

7.5. Information Behaviour and Information Worlds

The theory of information worlds argues for the examination of information behaviour in terms of the immediate social groups of everyday life, the mediating social institutions of phenomena such as the public sphere and the context of an entire society (Burnett & Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger & Burnett, 2005). These social structures constantly interact with and transform one another, shaping the ways in which individuals and groups interact with information and information technology. In examining these interrelated parts, the theory of information worlds focuses on five social elements:

- **Social norms**: a world’s shared sense of the appropriateness of social appearances and observable behaviours.
- **Social types**: the roles that define actors and how they are perceived within a world.
- **Information value**: a world’s shared sense of a scale of the importance of information.
- **Information behaviour**: the full range of behaviours and activities related to information available to members of a world. And
- **Boundaries**: the places at which information worlds come into contact with each other and across which communication and information exchange can — but may or may not — take place.

As with the social structures within information worlds, these elements are interrelated and constantly interact with and influence one another (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). As a localized information world, each small world has its own social norms, social types, information behaviour and perceptions of information value. The members of each small world have established ways in which information is accessed, understood and exchanged within their world and the degree to which it is shared with others outside the small world. Few individuals, however, exist only in one small world; it may not even be possible except in extreme circumstances of social isolation. In contrast, there is no real limit to the number of small worlds to which an individual can belong. A typical person is a part of many small worlds — friends, family, co-workers, fellow students, people with shared hobbies etc.

Any one of these small worlds may offer many places where its members are able to interact with members of other small worlds. Information moves across boundaries between worlds via people who are members of both
worlds or through interaction between members of two small worlds in a place where members of different small worlds are exposed to other perspectives. Further, the contact between small worlds and other inputs from the lifeworld can lead to the creation of new worlds, as information passing over the boundaries between worlds either blurs those boundaries or otherwise transforms or changes information behaviours and perceptions of information value. Encountering other small worlds can occur through public sphere institutions, such as in a public library, or through new technological avenues of communication and exchange, such as social networks on the Internet. As information moves through boundaries between small worlds, the information is treated, understood and used differently in each small world in line with the social norms of that world. As a result, the same information may have a different role within each small world.

Together, the totality of these small worlds constitutes the lifeworld of information. The ways that the small worlds in the lifeworld as a group treat information will shape how the information is treated within the lifeworld as a whole. As the information moves between small worlds, more and more small worlds will decide how to treat this information, generating an overall perception of the information across the lifeworld. The more small worlds that are exposed to information, the more exchange between small worlds there will be, and the better chances there will be for a democratic perception of and approach to the information.

However, beyond the small worlds, there are also influences at play in the lifeworld which shape the ways in which small worlds perceive information. Some of these influences increase contact between small worlds and promote democratic engagement in the lifeworld. Libraries, schools and other public sphere organizations exist specifically to ensure that information moves between the small worlds and that those members of each small world are exposed to other small worlds. In sharp contrast, other influences serve to constrain the movement of information between small worlds or constrict the socially acceptable perceptions of information. The most influential information worlds — such as those who possess political power or those who control the media — can use their power to push back against the collective small worlds to enforce a minority perception on the majority, asserting control over the information in the lifeworld.

Some influences on small worlds and the lifeworld are inherently neutral, but can be used for the objectives of either increasing or decreasing information access. Information technologies act as a way for small worlds to connect in new ways and to reach other small worlds that would not otherwise touch their boundaries. The Internet and online social networks represent particularly powerful examples of this phenomenon. But information technologies — like the Internet and more traditional media — can also work to homogenize perspectives or enforce hegemonic perspectives of small
but powerful small worlds on the lifeworld. In total, the small worlds are shaped by all of these larger influences, but also have the power collectively to define the parameters of the external influences.

The theory of information worlds ultimately provides a framework for understanding the multiple interactions between information and the many different social contexts within which it exists, from the macro (the lifeworld) to the meso (intermediate) to the micro (small worlds). It asserts that information behaviour is shaped simultaneously by both immediate influences, such as friends, family, co-workers and trusted information sources of the small worlds in which the individual lives, and larger social influences, including public sphere institutions, media, technology and politics. These levels, though separate, do not function in isolation, and to ignore any level in examining information behaviour results in an incomplete picture of the social contexts of the information.

7.6. Information Worlds in Information Behaviour Research

As noted above, information behaviour is one of the concepts embedded within the theory of information worlds, where it designates the full range of information-related behaviours and activities available to members of a world. As such, it is clear that the theory has implications for the broader study of information behaviour in a wide variety of settings, and that it can inform research into a wide variety of phenomena. The remainder of this chapter attempts to tease out some of these implications and to situate the theory in the context of some of the predominant approaches to information behaviour research over the past several decades. We make no claim here of presenting a definitive or exhaustive discussion; rather, we merely hope to provide some preliminary suggestions for the applicability of the theory for research and to outline some of the connections between the theory and other work in the field.

A good starting point for this discussion may be a relatively recent discussion about the future of information behaviour research. At this discussion, which took place during the 2009 ASIS&T conference in Vancouver, Sanda Erdelez (Burnett & Erdelez, 2010) created a stir when she suggested that, for future research in the field, the issue of ‘context’ would be of great importance, since, as she put it, ‘context’ as we have traditionally understood it has disappeared, or, perhaps more accurately, that it is ‘becoming an integrated multiple, rather than a singular, and [that] these multiple contexts impact information behaviour simultaneously’ (n.p.).

The core observation underpinning Erdelez’s comment — that the increasing prevalence of distributed technological tools (and, in particular,
hand held devices) has served to make traditional understandings of context increasingly untenable — is obviously not specific to the theory of information worlds. However, her point that context can no longer be taken as a ‘singular’ is also implicit in our conceptualization of information worlds, although we do not focus exclusively on technological issues. Rather, the theory acknowledges that information behaviours do not occur in isolation, but are situated or embedded within multiple contextual layers, all of which have an influence on how those behaviours unfold, how they are perceived, whether they are deemed to be successful, what they mean to those involved etc. In other words, just as information behaviour research is no longer solely focused on goal-oriented information seeking activities, it also can no longer limit itself to examinations of discrete activities in ‘singular’ contexts, but must consider the ways in which those localized contexts are embedded within — and influenced by — other contexts and other influences.

For example, searching activities undertaken by an individual user in a specific information setting such as a library are made possible, constrained and otherwise influenced not only by that individual’s information needs and by the characteristics and context of the local library but also by a myriad of other factors, including social, political and economic forces related both to the searcher and the setting; and, indeed, information behaviour may be influenced by factors of which individuals are only dimly aware and that are well outside of their control. For instance, the ways in which an individual searcher can look for — and use — information may be limited by external forces such as the governmental agencies that provide funding for the library and create legal parameters for service, exerting an influence on the library’s policies and practices (McClure & Jaeger, 2008). Further, factors such as the presence (or absence) of media sources in the local community might have an influence on the ways that the library’s services are structured or on various decision-makers’ judgments about whether those services should be expanded, contracted, privatized, or even eliminated (see, for instance, Streitfeld, 2010, which describes the furor over the 2010 privatization of a public library in Santa Clarita, CA).

In addition, a central tenet of the theory of information worlds — like the theories of one of our primary sources, Elfreda Chatman — is that localized social influences such as a community’s social norms and values are strong factors in the information behaviours exhibited by individuals. Thus, we see information activities not as encounters between discrete individuals and information systems, but as events in which the behaviours of individuals are never solely individual acts but also always mirror the norms, attitudes, values and concerns of the communities (or ‘worlds’) of which they are a part. In any information setting, then, there are numerous important actors: an individual, the information world of which that individual is a part (and
whose values and norms the individual enacts), some kind of information system or source (whether formal, as in a library, or informal as in a trusted friend), and further, larger-scale forces including the media, political structures and other culture-wide information worlds. Following the theory of information worlds, we see information behaviour as a complex activity influenced by all of these inputs simultaneously.

It is important to note here that we are not arguing that information behaviour research focused on either pure information seeking behaviours or on purely ‘singular’ contexts is without value. Rather, we are suggesting that the theory of information worlds can help to define new approaches that will be useful for examining how the full spectrum of forces that not only influence information behaviours but also determine how information itself is understood differently at different cultural levels. Indeed, the theory’s suggestion that context is inherently multiple is perhaps the chief modification it makes to the concepts of Elfreda Chatman, whose work depended upon very tight conceptual circles drawn around the ‘small worlds’ in which she saw information behaviour occurring and gaining meaning.

By comparison, the theory of information worlds acknowledges the importance — and, even, inescapability — of such ‘small world’ activities while also providing a conceptual framework for analysing how events, policies and other forces from beyond a world’s boundaries can significantly impact those activities, even if the inhabitants of a small world remain unaware of them or even, in some cases, actively disregard them. Thus, while Chatman could reasonably argue, within the framework of her theory, that ‘most of the information produced outside the small world has little lasting value’ to members of a small world (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998, p. 733), we would argue that the influence of those outside forces has a demonstrable impact and is often of extreme importance, even if it is concealed from or invisible to the inhabitants of a particular world. Information behaviour, even of the most localized kind, is a product of multiple contextual variables and can be fully understood only as a function of its relationship to these multiple contexts and ‘information worlds’.

The theory of information worlds, thus, is intended in part as a framework for investigating the full range of social influences on information and on the behaviours associated with information. Information worlds can be seen as the points at which individuals’ information behaviours intersect with social contexts, economic factors, political and legal structures, multiple levels of information policy etc. Because it emphasizes the ways in which information is contextually embedded within social worlds (both small and large), the theory is more closely linked to relatively recent approaches that investigate the real-world and everyday life settings than it is with more traditional approaches focusing on formal information seeking settings such as libraries and other information services.
Thus, we see connections between the theory and work such as Reijo Savolainen’s (2005) Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) model and the work of Karen Fisher and her colleagues (Fisher, 2005; Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004) on ‘information grounds’. However, although it is allied with them in important regards, the theory of information worlds can be distinguished from these approaches because of the way in which it also addresses phenomena beyond local and ‘everyday’ settings, including things like the mass media as well as federal — and even global — information policy. Both the media and governmental agencies are, themselves, important information worlds, and are particularly important because of the degree to which they are worlds wielding a great deal of power and that have the ability to reach across and into the myriad smaller worlds that make up a culture. Whether recognized or acknowledged in local settings, these large-scale information worlds, thus, exert considerable influence on local behaviours, attitudes and norms. To put it another way, while the local is always local — while, that is, local context is always a primary and direct factor in the everyday lives of people — it is never simply local, but also always the beneficiary (or victim) of other powerful external pressures and influences.

The theory also has potential implications for more traditional approaches to information behaviour research. Historically, such research has largely centred on the behaviour of individuals engaged in activities — whether active seeking or more passive activities such as browsing or ‘encountering’ — which, in one way or another, put them into contact with information. As Case (2007) points out, the focus of such research has shifted somewhat over time from an examination of the systems and sources from which information can be obtained to an interest in the experiences of users engaged in information behaviours. Again, at the core of much of this more recent work is the notion that a user’s information behaviour is motivated by a definable, if often unarticulated ‘gap’ or ‘need’, whether that need is defined as ‘visceral’ (as Taylor (1968) puts it), cognitive (as in Belkin’s (1978) concept of an ‘anomalous state of knowledge’) or affective (as in Kulthau’s (1991) work).

From the perspective of the theory of information worlds, then, we would argue that the ways in which users perceive, experience and even articulate such a ‘gap’ or ‘need’ — and, indeed, whether they even acknowledge it at all — is, to a great extent, not only a matter of their own individual situation, cognition or affective state but also a function of the information worlds in which they live. For example, if information related to sexuality is viewed with deep suspicion or rejected as being beyond the bounds of decency in a certain community, individual members of that community may reflect those values and not recognize questions or concerns about sexuality as ‘gaps’ or ‘needs’ that should be filled; rather, they may treat such
questions or concerns as something to be held at arm’s length or ignored entirely. Thus, the influence of the information world in which one lives may well be a determining factor in what one experiences as ‘important enough’ to constitute an information need in the first place.

A similar argument could be made using other core information behaviour and/or information retrieval concepts. For instance, Saracevic (1996) notes that evaluations of ‘relevance’ can occur across five dimensions: (1) system or algorithm relevance, (2) topical or subject relevance, (3) cognitive or pertinence relevance, (4) situational or utility relevance, and (5) motivational or affective relevance. As with ‘gap’ or ‘need’, the theory of information worlds would suggest that there is also a social component involved, and that the social norms and values of an information world impinge upon how individuals perceive the relevance of information.

7.7. Directions: Studies of Information Behaviour in Information Worlds

Like information behaviour, the concept of boundaries is a constituent part of the theory of information worlds. Because the theory, as a whole, posits intersections, overlaps, and boundaries between multiple worlds, it provides an ideal framework for studying instances in which multiple worlds actually come into contact in some way or another, and particularly for studying ways in which the differing norms and values of those words interact and — often — result in conflict. For example, although some of the terminology differs somewhat from that presented here, earlier work by the authors of this chapter has investigated federal information policy settings (Burnett & Jaeger, 2008) using the perspectives offered by the theory of information worlds. Other work has presented case studies of situations in which multiple information worlds play roles as stakeholders in particular events involving public libraries, resulting in conflict and controversy (Burnett et al., 2008).

A study currently in progress includes an investigation of the ways in which personal health records, through their content, design and structure, ‘project’ information worlds that may or may not align with the expectations, values and information behaviours of their potential users. Another study, by Burnett, Subramamiam, and Gibson (2009), uses the theory as a framework for analysing the role of gender in the information worlds of Latinas working in the information technology field. In addition, the theory provides a major part of the theoretical framework for a two-year study funded by the National Science Foundation as part of its initiative on Virtual Organizations as Sociotechnical Systems (VOSS). This project,
which investigates the lifecycles of virtual scientific teams and the effectiveness of long-term collaborations of scientists using the facilities of the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory at Florida State University, uses the theory as a way of conceptualizing and analysing the interactions, norms, values and information behaviours of scientists working together in order to determine whether the concepts of the theory can help to explain the success of some teams over the long term (Burnett, 2010).

We also see a potential for the theory to inform a wide range of studies of other settings in which information behaviour occurs and for which context is a multiple rather than a singular. Because libraries, as institutions, are often charged with meeting the needs of multiple constituencies, and because they are intrinsically formalized information worlds in their own right, they are ideal candidates for studies drawing upon the theory. In particular, the theory can offer a framework for investigating whether the norms and values embedded in the information worlds of libraries and in the services offered by libraries mesh with those of the communities they serve.

Outside of institutional settings like libraries, the theory can provide a set of concepts for the ways in which information behaviour takes place in specific social settings, whether online or in particular physical communities. Since much of the information that imparts a particular ‘flavor’ to a world can be seen as trivial outside of that world’s boundaries, the theory of information world can be used to further our understanding of the ways in which such ‘trivial’ information is, in fact, highly significant within a world, and the ways in which members of that world not only use but also attach particular values to that information. Further, it can allow analyses of the ways in which a world’s valued information is intertwined and enmeshed — or at odds — with political, social or other information coming into the world from outside. Similarly, since the mass media — and, for that matter, local and community-based media outlets — play such a major role in how information of various kinds is structured, slanted, and made available, and since there is clearly particular information behaviour associated with media use, the theory can be used as a way of melding media studies with information behaviour studies.

In particular, the theory can help to explain the interactions — whether benign or exploitative — between the distributed and powerful information worlds of the media and the norms, values and behaviours of smaller and more localized information worlds. And, finally (to return to the point made by Sanda Erdelez cited earlier in the chapter), just as the impact of handheld devices may be ‘exploding’ and complicating our sense of context, changing it from a singular into an interactive multiple, so too it may have a transformative effect on information worlds of all sorts, and the theory can, perhaps, serve as a guide for investigating the social meaning and social
impact of such devices, providing a useful framework for understanding the changes they bring about in information behaviour within those worlds.

As technology continues to alter the relationships between individuals and information, the perspectives offered by the theory of information worlds will continue to offer insights into the impacts on information behaviour within multiple levels of social, cultural and societal paradigms. The changing dynamics between information, technology and users that present unprecedented access to and ability to process volumes of information in ever more portable devices will also likely reshape behaviours related to information. These changes will also likely continue to exacerbate the gaps between the information behaviour of those in technologically rich environments and those in technologically poor environments. If historical precedent holds true, these changing dynamics will also lead to greater attempts by government and mass media to regulate and influence information behaviour. In all of these extremely important areas of sociotechnical change, the theory of information worlds presents a framework by which to understand the impacts on information behaviour at both the local and the societal level.

References


New York, NY: Oxford University Press.


