Reframing the Research of Information Work with Information Leadership and Situational Appropriation of Information

Isto Huvila

Department of Archives, Library & Information and Museum & Cultural Heritage Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden

E-mail: isto.huvila@abm.uu.se

Background

The importance of processing information in a functioning and sustainable manner equally concerns the individuals, organizations and entire domains of knowledge (Choo, 1998). To be successful, an organization needs to provide its members with useful information at the right moment to complete the right assignment. On an individual level, every one of us needs useful information at the right moment to do what we are about to do. The problem is not to point out who is the available person, or what is the available information or what is the assignment. The problem is to make them all converge in a productive manner (McGee et al., 1993; Davenport, 1997; Kirk, 1999; Al-Hawamdeh, 2002).

The productivity and effectiveness of information- and knowledge-related activity has been discussed for a long time in business contexts (Davenport & Prusak, 1997; Kirk, 1999). Some of the major areas of research include knowledge management (Davenport & Prusak, 1997), intellectual and social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), information culture (e.g., Ginman, 1993; Widén-Wulff, 2000), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), knowledge sharing (Widén-Wulff & Ginman, 2004; Widén-Wulff & Davenport, 2005) and knowledge engineering (Studer et al., 1998). The emphasis of the concerns has been, however, on either in managing externalized formal information, turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, or managing people and groups which possess critical internalized knowledge and expertise (Davenport & Prusak, 1997; Tan et al., 2007). In spite of the large body of research on the information- and knowledge-related issues, the *interaction* between human actors and knowledge (or information, ref. Blandford & Attfield, 2010) has been a relatively rare viewpoint even though McGee et al. (1993) underlined its significance already in 1993. It is important to capture and manage knowledge, information and intellectual capital (Stewart & Ruckdeschel, 1998; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), but it is equally important to

understand its use (McGee et al., 1993; Hall, 2006) and perhaps even more important to understand what information itself accomplishes and how it participates in the interactions.

Rewording the Problem

Rather than looking at information or knowledge itself, my ongoing line of research peruses the interface between human beings and the information they interact with in course of a process. The term, *information work*, is used to denote the information component of human activity. I have noted earlier that "all work has an information component and presumes some degree of information processing whether the work is manual labor or highly abstract decision making" (Huvila, 2009, p. 697). In information-intensive contexts such as libraries, archives and museums, information work can be the primary activity. More often, however, information work is a secondary activity that supports the principal activity and provides a framework for explicating the generative informational mechanisms of work. Information work is infrastructural, and in a sense, "sub-work" (Huvila, 2009), analogous to the notion of "computing work" discussed by Gasser (1986).

My present research investigates how information is related to the work of individual workers, how different kinds of information infrastructures and methods of organizing information affect the work outcomes, its efficiency and effectivity. The concept, information infrastructure, is used in this context to denote different technical systems and social arrangements that make information available and utilizable for organizations and individuals (e.g. Taylor & Wright, 2006; Huvila, 2009, 2011). The making of information infrastructures is bounded by everyday rationales of working in particular ways and diverse other *boundaries of knowing* (Huvila, 2012). That is, positive and negative factors limit our possibility to obtain (in a rationalistic sense) perfect information. An ongoing empirical study focuses on the information work of professionals who are working with archiving and management of information in the domain of archaeology and land development. The study is part of a larger project involving professionals from a broad variety of industries from heritage organizations and healthcare to technology sector.

Two Ways Forward?
Information Leadership and Situational Appropriation of Information

Conceptualizing the intricacies of information interactions (or information use) in terms of information work in the context and in relation to information infrastructures, I posit that the long-standing problems of managing and leveraging information discussed in the beginning of this

text can be condensed to three issues: (1) different people need different information, (2) people are not aware of how the information they create is used, and (3) people are not actively aware of what makes them to act the way they do.

At this stage of my research, it is obviously impossible to make normative claims about definite guidelines regarding how to address the complexities of information use and management. I suggest, however, that an augmentation of our current conceptual repertoire and rethinking of two common concepts, or premises, of managing and understanding information activities can prove to be helpful. The two proposed concepts (discussed in detail in Huvila, 2014 and Huvila, 2015) are: information leadership and the situational appropriation of information.

The basic assumption behind the proposed notion of *information leadership* (Huvila, 2014) is that there is a difference between managing and leading information work. This difference is analogous to the differences between trying to manage knowing and learning (by proxy) and leading knowing and learning in an organization. The making of decisions about the use, organization and management of information resources and information infrastructures has consequences to information work that are very different from the work of information and knowledge managers and knowledge leaders.

I further propose that a reconceptualization of information functions might help researchers conduct in-depth inquiries that will increase our understanding of the complexities of information use. Although there is much research describing and investigating managing the social processes of knowing, information and knowledge management research has put less emphasis on discussing how particular information becomes usable and how it is used in different contexts and situations. The notion of *situational appropriation of information* (Huvila, 2015) sheds light on this particular process in the context of daily information work practices of professionals. The notion helps to frame particular types of instances of information use that are not necessarily addressed within the objectivistic, information seeker or learning oriented paradigms of information and knowledge management managers and knowledge leaders.

References

Al-Hawamdeh, S. (2002). Knowledge management: Re-thinking information management and facing the challenge of managing tacit. *Information Research, 8*(1), 1-20.

Blandford, A., & Attfield, S. (2010). Interacting with information. San Rafael. *Synthesis Lectures on Human-Centered Informatics, 3*(1), 1-99..

Choo, C. W. (1998). *Information management for the intelligent organization: The art of scanning the*

environment (2nd ed.). Medford, NJ: Information Today.

Davenport, T. H. (1997). *Information ecology: Mastering the information and knowledge environment*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Davenport, T. H., & Prusak, L. (1997). *Working knowledge: How organizations manage what they know*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Gasser, L. (1986). The integration of computing and routine work. *ACM Transactions on Information Systems, 4*(3), 205-225.

Ginman, M. (1993). Information culture and business performance. *IATUL quarterly, 2*(2), pp. 93-106.

Hall, M. (2006). Knowledge management and the limits of knowledge codification. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 10*(3), 117-126.

Huvila, I. (2009). Ecological framework of information interactions and information infrastructures. *Journal of Information Science, 35*(6), 695-708.

Huvila, I. (2011). Social aspects of the ecology of information work. In J. Steinerová (Eds.), Information ecology and libraries: Proceedings of *the International Conference organised on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the Faculty of Philosophy at Comenius University in Bratislava* (pp. 27-36). Bratislava: Comenius University of Bratislava.

Huvila, I. (2012). *Information services and digital literacy: In search of the boundaries of knowing*. Oxford, England: Chandos.

Huvila, I. (2014). Towards information leadership. *Aslib Journal of Information Management, 66*(6), 663-677.

Huvila, I. (2015). Situational appropriation of information. *Aslib Journal of Information Management, 67*(5), 492-504. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/AJIM-02-2014-0029

Kirk, J. (1999). Information in organisations: Directions for information management. *Information Research, 4*(3). Retrieved from http://informationr.net/ir/4-3/paper57.html.

McGee, J., Prusak, L., & Pyburn, P. (1993). *Managing information strategically: Increase your company's competitiveness and efficiency by using information as a strategic tool (Vol. 1)*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

Nahapiet, J., & Ghoshal, S. (1998). Social capital, intellectual capital, and the organizational advantage. *Academy of Management Review, 23*(2), 242-266.

Stewart, T., & Ruckdeschel, C. (1998). Intellectual capital: The new wealth of organizations. *Performance Improvement, 37*(7), 56-59.

Studer, R., Benjamins, V. R., & Fensel, D. (1998). Knowledge engineering: Principles and methods. *Data and Knowledge Engineering, 25*(1-2), 161-197.

Tan, H. P., Plowman, D., & Hancock, P. (2007). Intellectual capital and financial returns of companies. *Journal of Intellectual Capital, 8*(1), 76-95.

Taylor, W. A., & Wright, G. H. (2006). The contribution of measurement and information infrastructure to TQM success. *Omega, 34*(4), 372-384.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Widén-Wulff, G. (2000). Business information culture: A qualitative study of the information culture in the Finnish insurance industry. *Information Research, 5*(3). Retrieved from http://informationr.net/ir/5-3/paper77.html

Widén-Wulff, G., & Davenport, E. (2005). Information sharing and timing: Findings in two Finnish organizations. In F. Crestani, & I. Ruthven (Eds.) *Information Context: Nature, Impact, and Role: 5th International Conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Sciences vol. 3507* (pp. 32-46). Berlin, Heidenberg: Springer-Verlag.

Widén-Wulff, G., & Ginman, M. (2004). Explaining knowledge sharing in organizations through the dimensions of social capital. *Journal of Information Science, 30*(5), 448-458.