



Applied Communication Technology: Information Organizations Networks

Health and Literacy: Theoretical Issues from a Science, Technology and Society Perspective Reflections following Oct. 2004 Theme 1 meeting

1. Information Intermediaries

What are information intermediaries? The term seems intentionally broad (or ambiguous), as indicating that they might be many things. However, in project outlines, they are presented as kinds of persons, situated between a client and some IT system, and capable of directing them towards relevant information. Why can only people be II's? For example, technologies, classifications, the organization of work space and so forth might similarly as important part of clients' informational environment, and certainly they have different many effects information seeking. Information intermediaries could thus also be seen as including 'material agents'. What technological intermediaries exist in your research context, and what role do they play?

2. Information

What is information? In classical information theory (e.g. Shannon and Weaver's model), information is conceived as neutral bits of data to be transmitted to a receiver. The problem is seen as removing the noise of the transmission channel. As Dewey said of an earlier version of this argument: "Speech is thus regarded as a practical convenience but not of fundamental intellectual significance. It consists of 'mere words,' sounds that happen to be associated with perceptions, sentiments and thoughts which are complete prior to language. Language thus 'expresses' thought as a pipe conducts water, and with even less transforming function than is exhibited when a wine-press 'expresses' the juice of grapes. The office of signs in creating reflection, foresight and recollection is passed by" (Dewey 1959: 140-1). With this goal in mind the obvious objective of information intermediaries becomes neutral guidance. However, in the social sciences, information use is seen as always an interpretive and situated process, and this makes the job of an intermediary may look quite different, since information can never be neutral. Rather than conveying objective data, information intermediaries can then be seen as non-neutral translators between various knowledge practices ('communities of practice', 'social worlds', 'actor-networks', and so forth). In such views information circulates between practices, and is necessarily transformed as part of successful communication. The difference is crucial for what is seen as a potential bias to be removed in the first model is viewed as a condition for communication in the second. What issues does this pose for human intermediaries filling different roles, such as librarians (taught not to give advice) or nurses at the phone line (responding to software prompts)?

3. Good Information

If information is seen as always interpretive this raises the immediate next question, what is good information? In the interpretive view, this question can only be answered relative to the context of use. In that case the presentation of health information the issue ensuring the reliability and quality of information sources is only a partial solution to the problem, since the information may be of high quality, yet seem completely irrelevant to target audiences. The question of relevance can not be answered by pointing to what is the necessary information, because it is just this question that can only be answered in conversation with clients. The entire issue of health literacy can then be seen not as settled (we know what it is, and we have as a goal to give it to someone who hasn't got it) but as an issue for shared learning (we have ideas of some of its parameters, but must suspend further judgment until we engage with clients). We need to focus on both the production end of information (appropriate grade level, quality) as well as the consumption end, as sense making and interpretation takes place equally at both ends.



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4. Health

A similar argument can be advanced concerning the concept of health. What counts as 'health' in health information? If the issue is not objectively settled, it raises the question of who gets to say so. Do we decide which health literacy people have to learn, or do they have a say? Whose health is presented? The issue is pertinent even within the official health care system, because it raises the question of medical controversy (as we know there are regularly competing medical solutions to problems), but also at the boundary between the medical establishment and the outside. What if clients' strongest interests were in getting good information on homeopathy?

5. Connection

Also, what does it mean to be connected? IT-use is a focal point for the research, but clients (even disenfranchised) are connected to many things other things than computers. One may presumably be adequately health literate while remaining off-line, just as one can remain health illiterate even if well connected. The question of connection might be fruitfully expanded by considering the rich information ecology in which clients are situated, and of which IT is but one (albeit important) part.

6. Community

Client populations are talked about as communities. What does this unit of study imply and how is it characterized? Communities are often assumed to be traditional and authentic, sharing norms, values, and habits, in special ways. Critics of the community concept argue that the notion tends to homogenize practices and downplay crucial internal differences. The question is played out when communities or their members in their existing forms of organization are termed natural, with the consequence that any changes introduced are defined negatively against a static background. In contrast with the focus on natural helpers, which possibilities could be explored if information intermediaries could also be positively characterized as unnatural (transformational) helpers?

7. Capacity Building

What are the capacities of a community and which ones are they missing? How do we know? Even if we know, how does one build them? Capacity building is a fraught term in development studies, among other reasons because it has a distinct paternalistic feel, suggesting that the researcher surveys a community, finds its capacities deficient and then undertakes a heroic effort to build them up. Are other modes of description and practical engagement available, offering more agency to populations and clients? Furthermore, in debates about capacity building, what roles can be imagined for technologies?

8. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model suggested that 'information interpretation is influenced by a large range of factors'. This formulation is already based on information-theoretical assumptions. An interpretive social scientist would say that information is thoroughly mediated (*never unmediated*, just mediated by different things, even in face-to-face communication) and this is what gives it sense to any specific actor or subject. Without the 'factors' there simply is no information, and therefore no interpretation, and no literacy. But, then, these factors are not external forces that happen to impinge on (or 'bias') information, but integral features of the communication process, which enters into every other aspect of the model. It is important to recognize this is not a terminological issue, but one of systematically interrelated divergences of conceptualization. Are there more adequate ways of dealing with this situation than attempting to integration such divergences into one shared model?

For follow-up discussion

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