

Theory and the Social Nature of Information

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Abstract

Many scholars have discussed their use of theory and metatheory to study the social nature of information. The approaches brought to the table by doctoral students and junior faculty will continue to shape the future of the information field with a social perspective. This panel will present the theoretical frameworks used by four emerging information scholars (Koepfler, Vitak, Alemanne, and Snyder), who will describe the social nature of information in the context of existing information research and social theory. Each will answer three questions: How and why did they include particular theories in their research framework? How is their framework and its view of the social nature of information unique? What are the implications of their work for studying the social nature of information? The moderator (Worrall), panelists, and discussant (Rosenbaum) will encourage new thinking and discussion among researchers and practitioners interested in social and theoretically-based studies of information.

Keywords: Social theory, social nature of information, theory, framework, social perspective

Purpose

Applying a social lens to information is now common (Kling, 1999; Raber, 2003; Talja, Tuominen, & Savolainen, 2005), and extends back to the exchange and sharing of information Bush (1945) imagined for his memex. To study the social nature of information, theoretical frameworks apply different terms to the social contexts: groups, communities, networks, worlds, grounds, and others (Clarke & Star, 2008; Ellis, Oldridge, & Vasconcelos, 2004; Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2007; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). No two frameworks are identical, but they share many similarities.

Scholars have discussed their use of theory and metatheory to study the social nature of information (Chatman, 2000; Fisher et al., 2004) or promoted a particular view (Hjørland, 1998; Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997). The approaches brought to the table by doctoral students and junior faculty will continue to shape the future of the information field with a social perspective. This panel will present the theoretical frameworks used by four emerging information scholars. They will describe the social nature of information in the context of existing information research and social theory, encouraging new thinking and discussion among an intended audience of researchers and practitioners interested in social and theoretically-based studies of information.

Acknowledgements: We thank Gary Burnett, Ameila Gibson, Anatoliy Gruzd, Michelle Kazmer, Bo Xie, and peer reviewers for their feedback and assistance.

Worrall, A., Koepfler, J. A., Vitak, J., Alemanne, N. D., Snyder, J., & Rosenbaum, H. (2013). Theory and the social nature of information [Panel]. *iConference 2013 Proceedings* (pp. 1047-1050). doi:10.9776/13384

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Activities

The panel will begin with the moderator, Adam Worrall, familiarizing the audience with the event structure and framing the social perspective of information. Each panelist will take ten minutes to present her area of research and the theoretical framework she is applying to it. Each panelist will address the following three questions:

- How and why did you include these theories in your research framework?
- How is your framework and its view of the social nature of information unique?
- What are the implications of your work for studying the social nature of information?

Following the presentations, a discussant, Howard Rosenbaum, will react to and reflect on the panelists' frameworks and research. He will take ten minutes to offer a broader perspective on how the frameworks are similar and unique in the context of past, present, and future information research.

An in-depth, vibrant discussion involving the audience, panelists, and discussant will fill the remaining time, guided by the panel moderator. Potential topics include but are not limited to (a) similarities and differences between frameworks; (b) advantages and disadvantages of different frameworks and social theories; and (c) the application of frameworks and social theories to multiple research problems.

Our session will last 90 minutes. Attendees will network and collaborate with scholars who may differ in research problems of concern, but share interests in similar theories and metatheories. The session will also bring together scholars with shared interests in social and theoretically-based studies of information, promoting "valuable" new thought and consideration of social theories and their application to information research by the audience and panelists (Veinot & Williams, 2012, p. 11).

Panelists

Jes A. Koepfler is a doctoral candidate in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland. Her dissertation research focuses on identifying salient values expressed through informal communication (i.e. tweets) by stakeholders related to the issue of homelessness. Koepfler's presentation will focus on the theoretical framing and methodological approaches she uses to identify salient values. She will discuss the practical implications this work has for better understanding information use and behavior from a values perspective among multiple stakeholders in an online context, drawing on theoretical frameworks from social psychology (Schwartz, 1992), information studies (Cheng & Fleischmann, 2010), and human-computer interaction (Friedman, 2011).

Jessica Vitak is an Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland's iSchool, studying the social impacts of new communication technologies. Vitak will discuss how social capital—a sociological concept describing the resources individuals exchange with members of their social network—can be applied to studying communication technologies like Facebook. After providing a theoretical and methodological overview of bridging social capital (Burt, 1992; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006), she will discuss results from a recent lab study in which participants characterized the specific bridging resources they exchange through interactions with their Facebook "friends," and how those resources relate to relational perceptions of network members.

Nicole D. Alemanne is a doctoral candidate in The Florida State University's College of Communication and Information. Her dissertation research focuses on interdisciplinary academic teams as intrinsically transient social worlds. She will discuss her work in developing a theoretical framework with which to study knowledge co-creation processes in interdisciplinary teams whose work is time-limited. This research draws on previous investigations into social worlds and social processes, including the social worlds framework (Strauss, 1978; Clarke & Star, 2008), social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), social networks (Haythornthwaite, 1996; Wellman, 1999), and group processes in intrinsically transient social worlds (Kazmer, 2006, 2010).

Jaime Snyder is a postdoctoral research fellow at the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University. Snyder's research focuses on social aspects of visualization practices and the creation and use of visual information in social contexts. Her dissertation investigated spontaneous drawing during face-to-face conversations as an information-driven communication practice. Snyder's work drew on theories from linguistic anthropology (Hanks, 1996) and interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) in order to expand the ways that images and image-making are studied in information science. Her

presentation will discuss notions of framing (Tannen & Wallat, 1993), footing (Goffman, 1979), and stance (Jaffe, 2009) that provided the analytic framework for this research.

Discussant

Dr. Howard Rosenbaum is the Associate Dean and an Associate Professor of Information Science in the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at Indiana University. He studies social informatics, ebusiness, and online communities; has published in a variety of information science journals; and co-authored the 2005 book "Information Technologies in Human Contexts: Learning from Organizational and Social Informatics" with Steve Sawyer and the late Rob Kling. Rosenbaum has also presented at ASIS&T, iConferences, and elsewhere. He has been recognized often for excellence in teaching and for the innovative use of technology in education, receiving awards and recognition from ASIS&T, Indiana University, Techpoint, and the Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education.

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