Library and information science research has, in the past, been described as being, to a large extent, “atheoretical”[1]. This substantial tome demonstrates that this can no longer be said of information behaviour research, and that a formal theoretical base is being established in this area.

For the first time, most of the significant conceptual frameworks and theoretical developments in information behaviour research are drawn together and presented in a single volume. This new edited book, organised in two parts, is a collection of three introductory chapters, followed by 72 shorter chapters or overviews of many of the concepts, models, and theories relating to information behaviour that have emerged in recent years (each, on average, about five pages long). While most of the theories presented in the book have emerged during the last 25 years, there are a small number that pre-date the 1980s that are also included, for example, Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (by McKechnie), that was developed by Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, in the 1920s and 1930s but not translated into English for a further 30 years; Zipf’s Principle of Least Effort (by Case), from 1949; and Taylor’s Information Use Environments (by Palmquist), developed in the 1960s.

The idea for this book arose from the 2003 Research Symposium of the Special Interest Group on Information Needs, Seeking, and Use (SIG USE) of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, which focused on theoretical frameworks of information behaviour. *Theories of Information Behavior* is dedicated to the late Elfreda Chatman, with the proceeds going to support the activities of ASIS&T SIG USE. There are contributions from more than eighty scholars, most of whom are internationally known information behaviour researchers. In a number of cases, the person writing about a particular theory or model is the same individual that developed it.

In their preface to the collection, the editors state that the aim of the book is to “facilitate theory building and use” (p. xix) in information behaviour research. They describe the book as a “researcher’s guide, a practical overview of both well-established and newly proposed conceptual frameworks that one may use to study different aspects of information behavior.” (p. xx).

The first part of the book comprises of three chapters, which collectively establish an intellectual and theoretical context for the rest of the book, which comprises of
summaries of more than seventy models and theories. The book opens with a thoughtful chapter by Marcia Bates on the use of metatheories, theories and models in library and information science (LIS) research. Bates clearly defines these three terms and discusses them in the context of theory building in LIS research. In her paper, Bates acknowledges that “most of ‘theory’ in LIS is really still at the modeling stage” (p. 3). This is generally reflected in much of the content of the book. Bates also emphasises that use of models can be an integral phase in theory building, “models sometimes stand as theoretical beacons for years, guiding and directing research in a field, before the research finally matures to the point of producing something closer to a true theory” (p. 3).

Using, as an example, the Principle of Least Effort, Bates shows how we can move from empirically tested principles that predict behaviour to theories that explain behaviour. Bates’s chapter is probably the single most important chapter in the book as having a clear understanding of, and being able to distinguish between, metatheories, theories, and models is a fundamental prerequisite for future theory building in information behaviour research. It is one of a few chapters in the book that deals with the process of theory building in and of itself, rather than focusing on one particular concept, model, theory or methodology.

The second and third chapters are by Dervin and Wilson, respectively. These are both relatively short chapters. Dervin’s chapter focuses on her sense-making methodology and the relationship between methodology and theory in relation to her sense-making approach. Dervin also distinguishes between different kinds of theory, she discusses “substantive theory” that is based on empirical findings, metatheory, which is concerned with the “philosophically grounded assumptions about the phenomena and how to study it” (p. 25), and a third kind of theory, theory of methodology. Dervin discusses the contribution that her sense-making methodology has made to developing theory for methodology. Dervin also explains the relationships that need to exist between these three kinds of theory for theory building to occur. Wilson’s chapter is concerned with the evolution of models of information behaviour and in particular on his own significant contributions in this area. Wilson explains how his revised general model of information seeking is a framework that can incorporate theoretical components (for example stress-coping theory).

The subsequent information behaviour theories presented in part two of the book are wide ranging and include both those that are well-established and others that are emergent. These are listed in an alphabetical sequence by name of theory, and while it would be a challenge to organise this material thematically this could nonetheless have been useful to the reader. Thankfully the book is well indexed (an integrated subject and author index is provided). The inclusion of keywords at the start of each paper would also have been a useful orientation device for the reader. For each theory, a selection of references of other useful readings relating to that particular theory is provided. There are also a number of illustrations, for example of particular models, and tables, included in the book.

It is not possible to mention all the topics or theories covered in this book. The book includes contributions on models of information seeking – including the Big6 model of information problem solving (by Lowe and Eisenberg); Williamson’s ecological model of information seeking and use (by Williamson); Ellis’s model of
information-seeking behaviour (by Ellis); the everyday life information seeking (ELIS) model (by Savolainen); a general model of the information seeking of professionals (by Leckie); Krikelas’s model of information seeking (by Henefer and Fulton); Kuhlthau’s model of the information search process (by Kuhlthau); a nonlinear model of information-seeking behaviour (by Foster); and Ingwersen’s general model of cognitive information seeking and retrieval (by Ingwersen); on cognitive and affective aspects of information behaviour (for example, contributions by Belkin, Hjørland; Nahl; and Rieh); information seeking and work activities (for example, contributions by Byström; Detlor; and Sundin and Hedman); and everyday life information behaviour (for example, contributions by Hartel; Julien; and Rothbauer). It also covers theories of information grounds (by Fisher), information horizons (by Sonnenwald), information encountering (by Erdelez), berrypicking (by Bates), and browsing, for example Chang’s browsing framework (by Chang). There are three papers that focus on Chatman’s work: one by Hersberger on Chatman’s theory of information poverty, Fulton’s paper on Chatman’s theory of life in the round, and Solomon’s paper on rounding and dissonant grounds which builds on Chatman’s theoretical work.

The scope of the book does not, however, extend across all areas of human information behaviour; for example, there is little coverage of theories concerning how people make relevance judgements or the process of evaluating the outcomes of information seeking, although there are papers that explore information use.

The book will primarily be of interest to those involved in information behaviour research – academics, researchers, and students. It will be useful as a core text on postgraduate taught programmes (at both Masters and PhD level) – it has already been introduced on to such courses since its publication – and invaluable to research students for examining theories that relate to their dissertation topic. For scholars concerned with theory building in information behaviour research the book will serve as a guide to what work has already been done in this area. Many of the chapters conclude with the suggestion of topics or theoretical ideas that need further research in order to progress theory building in this area. What most of the conceptual frameworks and theories in the book have in common is that they do need further empirical testing in order to facilitate theory building in information behaviour research. The importance of this book therefore should not be underestimated as it enables LIS scholars to see the range and scope of existing work in this area and to identify avenues for future research.

One of the possible weaknesses of having a book of more than eighty contributors or “voices” is that each chapter has its own tone and internal structure, and this can make the book feel at times fragmented. The alternative would have involved heavy editing and a more rigid format and it is arguable as to whether this would ultimately improve the readability of the text. That said the book is well written and edited, and, for the most, a very enjoyable and interesting read.

Overall, this is an excellent and long awaited resource that will enable those working inside and outside of the field of human information behaviour to see the theoretical progress that has been made in this area.

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Note

1SQ1. McKechnie and Pettigrew (2002) commenting on the conclusions of previous studies of the use of theory in LIS.

Reference


The Impact of Information on Society; An Examination of its Nature, Value and Usage (2nd edition)

*MICHAEL W. HILL*

K.G. Saur
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Michael Hill is well-known as a doyen of the British information science community. Beginning, like so many of his contemporaries, as a chemist, he moved into library/information work at the establishment of a national reference library for science and technology, incorporating the London Patent Office library, and was later a member of the organising committee which established the British Library. He has been involved in many professional activities, and is, in short ideally suited to write a personal account of the information world, and his view of its most important concepts and issues.

Which is, in a nutshell, what this book is. The title is a little misleading, in that it suggests that this is an analysis of the “information society” concept, akin to that of Feather (2004), whereas this particular aspect only appears, at least explicitly and centrally, in the latter chapters of the book. It has more relation to Vickery and Vickery’s (2004) seminal information science textbook, from the same publisher.

The initial chapters, on the nature and impact of knowledge and on the quality and reliability of information, set the tone for the rest of the book. Focusing on central concepts and issues, they are scholarly and well-referenced, while at the same time illuminated by fund of anecdotes and personal asides. Hill sets outs his scientific take on these matters in the preface, declaring that “a fact, dry or otherwise, is the basic particle of information” and this rational and pragmatic approach permeates the whole book. The book is clearly and well written, in an informal, although serious, style.

The following chapters, on the comprehension and communication of information, continue with the presentation of general principles, illuminated by examples and anecdotes. The sixth chapter, entitled with typical modesty “Some aspects of information, knowledge and document management” acts as a bridge between the earlier conceptual material, and the approach to information society issues which