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Information Interchange

Rita Marcella and Graeme Baxter

The Theory of Information Interchange by Marcella and Baxter evolved over a number of years from the research on government information service and citizen information behavior at a regional, United Kingdom and European level over a number of years. With a background in information science and communication research (e.g., work by Kuhlthau, 1991; Dervin, 1976; Ford, 1973; Wilson, 1981), the theory focuses on the importance of considering the roles and aims of both the information provider and of the information user in assessing the effectiveness of, and potential improvements to, the information communication process.

A number of papers provide detail of the research evidence upon which the theory is based. The earliest of these involved an evaluation of the implementation of European information policy in the United Kingdom (Marcella & Baxter, 1997). It revealed the variety of contexts in which users might require information about the European institutions, while suggesting that individuals frequently lacked any motivation to seek such information or awareness that such information might be of value to them in their everyday lives. The study also highlighted a gulf between the European Commission's objective in developing information services and the perspective of a potential user who is most frequently apolitical. The European Commission focused largely on a desire to encourage a positive (political) response to Europe, if manifested or even disguised in an apparently altruistic desire to be more open and transparent in governing. The user's focus was on a personal value of information for making a decision, solving a problem, resolving a worry, or understanding a complex phenomenon (in line with Dervin, 1976). Moreover, the research suggested that each user might require this information in a range of different life contexts — educational, work related, business, domestic, consumer-oriented, recreational, and political purposes. The latter are arguably the least potent motivators. In contrast, the European Commission conceptualized a public need for what might be very loosely and unhelpfully construed as "general citizen" information for which there was very little evidence of need.

A second project investigated service provision and information need at the national UK level, characterized as an exploration of "citizenship information" (Marcella & Baxter, 1999; Marcella & Baxter, 2000a; Marcella & Baxter, 2000b; and Marcella & Baxter, 2001). It sought to develop a holistic understanding of the nature and use of citizenship information, its potential contribution to the individual's capacity to prosper and survive, and the ways in which access to information might support the democratic process and encourage participation. The study highlighted again the tendency for services and researchers to conceptualize citizenship information in a far more literal and limited way than might the citizen who simply wanted to

know what they needed to know in order to deal with the demands that life might throw at them. There is an observable, indeed understandable, desire on the part of providers to place limits around what must be provided, a desire still manifest in providers' construction of public sector information in the context of freedom of access to information.

A further project (Marcella, Baxter & Moore, 2002; Marcella, Baxter & Moore, 2003) explored the impact of new information and communications technologies on use of parliamentary information. The results indicated that new technologies, while offering a means of widening access to some groups in the population, did little to overcome the barrier of apathy for those with little sense that such information might have real value to them.

Marcella and Baxter have drawn on the themes developed by Schutz (1946), which suggested that different persons in different situations may possess different world views and make different demands on information sources and services as a result. They argue that the evolution of a body of well-informed citizens has been hindered, since Schutz developed his theories, by an increasing anonymity and isolation in social life, by the exponential growth in the amount of information available to the individual, and by the alternative modes of access possible in its communication.

Information Interchange Theory is built upon the fundamental dichotomy between the information provider view and the user view. The provider seeks to generalize and work towards a baseline and poorly articulated state of 'informedness' necessary to survive and/or to respond positively to the public sphere. In contrast, the user acts in a variety of contextualized roles, and varies in his or her level of expertise or informedness prior to the interchange of information. The user view is multiple, rich, and complex, with a variation in motivation to become highly informed dependent on the urgency and significance of information need.

The theory conceptualizes the information user in an essentially postmodernist way, as an isolated and fragmented entity who may assume certain characteristics in particular life contexts. It calls for highly qualitative techniques in research design, techniques that offer opportunities to create rich pictures of individual complexity. More recently Marcella and Baxter have developed an innovative tool, the interactive electronically assisted interview, which enables the collection of data about information need and information-seeking behavior while prompting users to discuss freely and expand upon the relationship between information and their experience as "citizens."

Information Interchange Theory also helps to elucidate the nature of the relationship between provider and user in a highly critical and thoughtful manner. The figure below illustrates these two-way relationships and roles of each of the information actors in interchange.

Information Provider

Seeks to create the ‘well-informed citizen’.
Seeks to promote positive response to certain messages.

Conceives of the user as a general stable and predictable citizen with standard requirements.

Values information about user response to information about government, in order to test public opinion.

Demonstrates tension between desire to inform and mould opinion and desire to create well-informed citizens capable of formulating thoughtful opinions.

Is frequently issue-focused and message-focused.

Information provision seen as proactive and purposive.

Information user

Seeks information of interest, practical use and benefit.
Has little intrinsic desire to be informed as a citizen.

Requires objective, unbiased information to enable sound decisions to be made.

Displays complexity in individual level of informedness required.

Shares some but few general stable characteristics with other users.

Sees limited value in providing information to government if there is no perceived benefit or response.

Increasingly finds much about government difficult to understand and is unconvinced about the benefits of increased understanding.

Is frequently issue-focused but increasingly cynical about messages.

Information use tends to be highly reactive, ad hoc and unpredictable.

Information Interchange Theory recognizes the significance of the different roles and objectives of the information “actor” in holding, providing, withholding, accessing, and using information in a complex interaction between (at least) two parties with potentially conflicting conceptions of the purpose of the interchange process, where all actors are influenced by their context or

agenda. It recognizes that information actors will demonstrate varying degrees of activity or passivity in differing information behavior contexts and that each actor may assume different roles and different levels of activity/motivation/informedness in varying life contexts.

While Information Interchange Theory recognizes individuality and complexity in the users of government information, the authors' research has also revealed that it is possible to draw some highly significant generalizable conclusions, such as:

- The finding that young people were less convinced of the importance of being able to access high-quality and reliable information
- The fact that better educated respondents tended to be more critical of their own capacity to locate high-quality information and more discerning about the limitations of the sources that were available to them
- The fact that it was highly questionable whether users (whether apparently expert or not) were in fact consistently able to judge the quality and extent of their own informedness

A most direct application of Information Interchange Theory is in the study of government information; however, it might also be used in studies of other sectors, such as business information and information literacy. In their current research, Marcella and Baxter have applied the theory to an examination of user information needs in the context of public sector organisations related to the implementation of Freedom of Information legislation in the UK. The theory could be also applied in study of various types of information service to examine misalignments in service ethos and to develop a better understanding of the user perspective.

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