Journal of Information Literacy

Conference corner

Information: interactions and impact (i^3) 2015

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Summer 2015 in Aberdeen and the 5th i^3 Conference saw delegates from around the world
gathering for 4 days of reflection and lively discussion about the use and impact of information (23-
26 June).

This biennial international conference was established as a forum for the presentation of research
into the way people, organisations and communities interact with information and the role and
impact of such interactions in a wide range of contexts. As always the conference successfully
brought together some of the traditionally separate fields of information behaviour, information
literacy and information services, seeking points of connection between these interests with a
common focus on understanding the way that information can change and shape people's lives,
workplaces and communities.

Four keynote presentations injected thought-provoking ideas and questions, challenging delegates
to consider the role of information in relation to major societal issues and whether our research is
asking the right questions.

Olaf Sundin talked of the role of information literacy research in a democratic society and the need
to address concerns about a world where information search has become so ubiquitous in
everyday life that it has almost become invisible, a world in which the critical evaluation of
information is being outsourced to the principles of global commercial search engine companies.
Olaf asked whether we have abdicated responsibility for finding information to powerful companies
of which we know little. He argued that we understand neither their motivations nor their agendas.
He urged information literacy scholars to be bold, and not to be afraid of being complicated or
taking a stand.

William Kilbride spoke from the perspective of digital preservation and again highlighted major
concerns facing the world of digital preservation. Despite the many major technical advances he
illustrated forcefully the fact that digital preservation must not be thought of as simply being about
'data', 'access' or 'compliance' but rather about people and opportunity, and the need to enhance
human capacity, improve competence and responsiveness in workforces and greater collaboration.

David Bawden picked up the theme of impact of information and how we can address the real
impact and value of information in terms of 'understanding', a higher order knowledge which does
not at present feature explicitly in any models of information behaviour or information literacy.

Dorothy Williams, the outgoing Director of i^3, posed the conundrum that the very ubiquity of
information and information activities makes it both more important and more challenging for
information researchers to share their understanding beyond the immediate information and library
science (ILS) community. In reflecting on the themes and topics which had been addressed in i^3
since 2007, she urged delegates to consider the need for more evidence of the role and impact of
information in real-life contexts.

Parallel sessions across the four days offered delegates the opportunity to catch up with recent
and ongoing research on information interactions in a wide range of contexts including democratic
engagement, economic and community development, education and lifelong learning, health and
well-being, heritage and culture, identity, reputation, privacy and ethics. While the range was
broad, the focus as always was on understanding the nature, role and development of information

practices, literacies and behaviours in those settings and the implications for those seeking to improve access and provision of information. It was interesting that an ever increasing topic of interest is the role of social media as a source of information research especially in the political arena and related area of climate change discourse (characterised as the 'unknowledge economy' by Robert Hunter). Furthermore, information behaviour in the mobile context appeared for the first time and we are convinced that this will become an important and growing area for our attention in the future. Matt Pointon's expansion and updating of Wilson's information behaviour model for smartphone research demonstrates how our field can easily be adapted to enable us to understand this rapidly growing technological context.

The quality of the presentations within these parallel sessions could be felt in the range and quality of the issues generated from the accompanying discussion sessions. This small sample reflects the diversity: What is the relationship between 'real world' and online identity? To what extend is social media use an act of self-presentation/promotion? What is the socioeconomic benefit of information transformation? Are we restricted by models? Are our school/library professionals trapped in discursive practices? How to address methodological challenges of recording/capturing 'southern' contexts? Can young people be taught how to be more sceptical and questioning about the information they find? Are we exploiting effectively the range of methods to communicate our findings e.g. pictures and metaphors? Can we use more participatory methods to engage our research participants to gain richer and more meaningful data to facilitate genuine impact?

These key issues and questions (and many more) formed the basis of discussion and debate in two highly interactive plenary sessions, led by Mark Hepworth and Geoff Walton. Delegates worked in groups to reflect, debate and develop the issues, teasing out some priorities and opportunities for future research and development. A large number of discussion points emerged from this session with some intriguing recommended research questions for further exploration.

There was a view that we need to explore and use a wider variety of research methods (to avoid methodology 'wars'). Perhaps more holistic approaches such as "information practice" as a new, alternative discourse to information behaviour should be considered. The question was asked, do we have appropriate methods/tools for dealing with New Generation things, for example big data? There was a view that the use of visual data is of growing importance in our research. Also that we need an exploration of more participative methods, and the challenges and opportunities they might bring. In other words, researching *with* communities, rather than talking *at* communities. There is a need to understand how different groups look at things in order to provide the correct support for the people in that context. In this way context is central especially the importance of different cultural and national settings for example, health or international students. Can understanding group contexts help in targeting more vulnerable groups and how to empower them with information?

The discussion also focused on moving beyond traditional research areas – moving away from focus on academic and health contexts into more non-traditional research areas and which actively involves communities. Is it time to examine issues of social conclusion and the politics of information? In tandem with this should we be investigating the dynamics within communities and raising information literacy as political issue?

Finally, the discussion centred on the impact and value of research. The emerging view was that only when research is connected with real issues, which provide evidence of genuine impact, will it become valued by society at large. It was remarked that this, in turn, is far more likely to have a future effect for example, on practice, or on community empowerment for social and political change.

The main research questions that emerged from these discussions were:

1. What does social inclusion mean from an information perspective?

2.   How has people's information seeking behaviour changed in Scotland post-referendum?

3.   What are the common characteristics of high-impact, interdisciplinary information research projects?

4.   How do we apply the things we learn from research to teaching/the design of information systems?

5.   How can we establish effective relationships with vulnerable groups for research purposes, with the aim of achieving impact?

Alongside all this hard work the excellent social programme offered delegates a chance to unwind. A civic reception with the Lord Provost of Aberdeen was held in the city's Maritime Museum where exhibits present some of the history of Aberdeen in its journey from a major sea-faring and fishing port to the oil capital of Europe. A networking reception provided a relaxed environment overlooking the River Dee to continue conversations, fortified by wine and canapés. The conference dinner expected a little more energetic response from delegates – following some excellent food and entertaining sketches by Aberdeen iSchool's answer to 'Morecambe and Nae-Wise' (Peter Reid and Simon Burnett), delegates danced the night away in a ceilidh, whirling their partners enthusiastically to the sound of the Scottish fiddle!

Powerpoint presentations from keynotes and delegate papers are available on the i[3] webpages at http://www.rgu.ac.uk/research/conferences/i-2015. A range of full papers will appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Information Science* in June 2016. The next conference is scheduled for June 2017.