

Information Practices in Contemporary Cosmopolitan Civil Society

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Abstract

What is the nature of information? What is its role in Contemporary Cosmopolitan Civil Society? What is the basis for the widespread current belief that we live in an ‘information society’? The present article will examine these questions through an examination of the historical origins of established ‘scientised’ views of information in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It describes how postmodern and poststructuralist critique of such positivist approaches led to profound paradigmatic and methodological shifts in the social and information studies fields in recent decades. It considers how the emergence of social constructivist approaches to information research drawing on discourse analysis, practice theory and ethnographic theories and methodologies has led to have led researchers to a radically different understanding of central concepts such as: the influence of emergent information and communication technologies on contemporary society; the relationship between knowledge and power, the nature of expertise and authoritative information; a re-thinking of community and consensus; a re-interpretation of notions of space and place in information dissemination, sharing and use and a reconsideration of the role of the researcher. The article illustrates this changing research landscape through reference to the work of scholars in the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney, published in the Centre’s journal, [Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an interdisciplinary journal](#).

Introduction

What is the nature of information? What is its role in Contemporary Cosmopolitan Civil Society? What is the basis for the widespread current belief that we live in an ‘information society’? That we live in an information society is a truism so generally accepted as to have become a cliché. Since the 1960s, the influence of the work of writers such as Fritz Machlup (1962) and Daniel Bell (1973) has led to the widespread acceptance that the defining feature of contemporary society is the preeminent importance of information for its economic and social functioning. Yet despite this, as Webster (2006) has pointed out, there is surprisingly little consensus among scholars as to how to define the contemporary information society or even what constitutes evidence of its existence.

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The present article will explore the question of the nature of information practices in contemporary cosmopolitan civil society in a number of ways. Firstly, it will critically examine the historical origins of established ‘scientised’ views of information in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Mainstream concepts such as researcher objectivity and ‘scientific fact’ have been so widely accepted in the Western world for so long and have been so influential in shaping our major institutions and professions that it has become all too easy to lose sight of the fact that they are the product of a particular historical context, a response to the major social and economic changes that characterised the beginnings of modernity and the birth of the modern, industrial nation-state.

Having explored the historical context of the rise of mainstream, modernist approaches to understanding the nature of information and its role in society, the article will go on to examine how the very different social, economic and technological environment of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have given rise to radically different theories and research approaches. It describes how postmodern and poststructuralist critique of prevailing positivist approaches led to profound paradigmatic and methodological shifts in the social and information studies fields in recent decades. It considers how the emergence of social constructivist approaches to information research drawing on discourse analysis, practice theory and ethnographic theories and methodologies has led researchers to a radically different understanding of central concepts such as: the influence of emergent information and communication technologies on contemporary society; the relationship between knowledge and power, the nature of expertise and authoritative information; a re-thinking of community and consensus; a re-interpretation of notions of space and place in information dissemination, sharing and use and a reconsideration of the role of the researcher.

As this is a special issue designed to celebrate five years of *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an interdisciplinary journal*, the article will, where possible, use articles published in the journal to illustrate these changes in the theoretical and research landscape. Arguments in the context of civil society have often assumed that information is fundamental to notions of progress in modernism and that democracy is based on the free flow of information both vertically and horizontally within a society. While these assumptions still underpin research into information in this context, they are now more often the focus of the research than the taken for granted context within which the research takes place.

One of the key concerns in contemporary civil society is therefore: what is the nature of our relationship with information? And then what are the implications for the future? From the perspective of the field of information studies, this question focuses squarely on an issue that has beset the field for the past forty years – what is the nature of information? This paper will not rehearse arguments of philosophy and practice which have become almost ritualised within information studies and information and knowledge management. Instead, it will focus on the workings of civil society and the role of information in that process.

Established views of our relationship with information in civil society

The idea that we live in an ‘information society’ (Webster 2006) – one where the growing influence of information and communication technologies has transformed the nature of both economic and social life – is now one which, judging by both mass-media coverage and governmental policy initiatives, is a matter of acceptance rather than debate. The widespread use of the phrase has left it more or less devoid of meaning, but some common threads emerge, including the use of information and communication technologies, multiple understandings of information, the ubiquity of information, the importance of literacy and the significance for progress and a cohesive society of an informed citizenry. For the purposes of this paper, three established views of our relationship with information will be touched on: progress and the importance of scientific knowledge; democracy, an informed citizenry and the public sphere; and notions of authority and expertise. Yet, as this article will explore, a growing body of researchers, including those associated with the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies research centre, have come to challenge and critique these established views.

Many of the most fundamental tenets of western, liberal democracy have their origins in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau, Diderot and Kant espoused the notion of the Perfectibility of Man: the idea that people, without divine aid, are capable of self-improvement; that both individuals and society as a whole can progress through rational investigation of the social and natural worlds. In arguing for knowledge-derived rationalist principles and empirical engagement with the world, their ideas became the intellectual driving force behind the radical transformation of society in the 18th and 19th centuries. Science, bureaucratic infrastructure and industrialisation can all be seen as manifestations of the systematising worldview that epitomised early modern society.

The Enlightenment belief in the power of objectivist, rationalist enquiry to provide authoritative ‘good information’ remains powerful today: access to such information continues to be seen as the basic building block of progress. Evidence-based practice is still at the core of professional work in many fields. Information gathered according to rigorous principles and presented in the formats conventional in science underpins the work of the courts, teachers, journalists, social workers and others. Ordinary people are used to interpreting what is said to be scientific information. The weather forecast on TV presents synoptic charts, juries may be asked to consider DNA research in making their decisions on guilt or innocence; election results are predicted through statistical analysis (Drori and Meyer 2006). Scientific knowledge, transformed into what Drori and Meyer call a ‘scientized script’, is at the heart of much policy development, even in the social field. A scientific approach to a social issue turns it into a problem for which it is asserted that scientifically-derived data can provide a solution. Scientisation can lead to universal approaches to social problem solving and a single focus of expertise and authority. Despite the danger this may pose, its advocates argue that the positioning of scientific information as ubiquitous and of ordinary citizens as active participants in a knowledgeable society can foster a culture where this knowledge can be seen as empowering, where active citizens can engage with social issues and participate in the development of cosmopolitan civil society.

As Foucault (1972, 1980) has pointed out, the growing influence of the sciences, bureaucracy and industry in the modern world has led to the development of regimes of *power/knowledge*. Some information, whether from the fields of science, culture or politics, was considered authoritative and thus credible or trustworthy (cf Leith 2013). Understandings of informational authority were bound up in notions of expertise and institutional power. Many institutions and practices arose to support the authority of these new breeds of ‘experts’. Experts had been through processes of accreditation or validation: they worked in universities, they consulted to governments, they worked for reputable organisations, their work had been subject to scrutiny by other experts, and it had been published by well-established publishing houses. Experts were seen as named individuals, able to be trusted and to speak credibly on a topic. The institutions in a society which created experts and their expertise were the very institutions which held power in a society. One of the key features of the work writers, such as Foucault, Bourdieu and Latour, who have been critical of the modernist agenda has been to examine the political nature of such institutions, questioning who is empowered and who excluded by their practices.

Information and its use in reasoning and in empirical enquiry have been fundamental to the democratising processes that form the foundations of modern scientific and western, liberal democracy. From them we derive the principle, perhaps best exemplified by Habermas' (1989) notion of the *public sphere*, that a well -informed citizenry and the free flow of ideas from sources other than government and business are fundamental requirements of a healthy society. Although Habermas's public sphere has been criticised for many reasons, including its lack of concern for women and its notion of universality, the idea of a public sphere, a space where ideas can be distributed and debated, took on a new lease of life with the popularisation of the internet in the early years of the 21st century. Governments have also acknowledged their responsibilities in making known information, commonly known as public sector information, gathered as their departments fulfil their accountabilities (Henninger 2013).

In the information field, the emphasis on the importance of information, its access and dissemination, led to the emergence in the late 19th century of the documentalist movement (Rayward 1975). Its founders, Paul Otlet and Henri Lafontaine, sought to develop a number of practices which would enable any educated and informed person, anywhere in the world, to identify and locate the book or other printed source they wanted to consult. Their work on the development of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) scheme, based in part on Melvil Dewey's system, that would allow information professionals to 'capture' the essential meaning of any document, to classify it with appropriate scientific rigour and thus, in theory, afford universal access, and the Mundaneum, a central repository of the information of the world, were far-sighted approaches to information services which foreshadowed the workings of the world wide web.

This concern with access to information continues to be at the centre of contemporary discussions about information poverty. Although still dominated by discussions of physical and bibliographic access, which were of concern to members of the documentalist movement, some more recent work has come to include a focus on intellectual access. Information literacy became a major strand of the work of UNESCO and the Alexandria Proclamation of 2005 (IFLA 2008) saw information literacy as a way to empower people. Information literacy is crucial in a world where information and communication technologies are widely used and where children are learning to read and write using computers rather than books. A good

example of a more holistic approach to information access is the article by Baird and Henninger (2011), whose work explored accessibility features of ebooks for children in the context of literacy.

Changing perspectives

Views of information and its position in society have changed in the last forty years and the introduction of the internet and the world wide web have hastened these changes since the mid-1990s.

Enlightenment-derived notions of absolute truth and objectivity have been subject to a growing body of critique. Roland Barthes (1988) argued that the meaning of a text is neither intrinsic nor determined by the author but constructed by the reader. Michel Foucault (1980) extended this view to argue that meaning is being constantly negotiated, contested and reaffirmed through discourse, a complex network of relationships between people, texts, ideas, institutions and established social practices. This paradigmatic shift to seeking to understand information as a social construct also underpins the work of a range of writers on the information society, including Manuel Castells (1996) and postmodernists Jean-François Lyotard (1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1988). While earlier writers such as Fritz Machlup (1962) and Daniel Bell (1973) sought to find a quantitative measure to demonstrate through rigorously collected data that the developed world has become an information society, Castells, Lyotard and Baudrillard aimed instead to gain a qualitative understanding of how emergent information and communication technologies (ICTs) have transformed the cultural, political and economic landscapes. Lyotard (1984) argued that the complexity of contemporary society, the sheer volume of data and the multiplicity of messages and interpretations that ICTs afford means that there will always be more than one meaning attributed to an event or message. Similarly, Baudrillard (1988) argued that all meaning is symbolic and that the western world's attempt to maintain the notion of a single truth in the face of a multiplicity of narratives has led only to greater insecurity and fear. He argues that postmodern society has entered a form of 'hyperreality' where reality, in the Enlightenment sense, effectively disappears. While modernist writers, like Machlup (1962) and Bell (1973), sought a quantitative measure that would demonstrate that the developed world had moved beyond industrialism to become an information society, postmodern writers, like Baudrillard,

attempt to qualitatively describe the changing nature of the experience of living in contemporary society.

Power and knowledge

Information researchers have long been criticised for failing to engage with issues of power relations (Dervin, 1986; Olsson, 2005b; 2009). While Elfreda Chatman's (1991; 1999) *Life in a Small World/Life in the Round* provided an important theoretical lens for information researchers seeking to understand marginalised communities, even here issues of power relations are implicit rather than explicitly theorised. Foucault (1980) had provided researchers with a way to engage with power relations in his discussion of subjugated knowledges, which have been 'disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (1980, p. 82). Within Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre, Olsson (2013), in examining constructions of Shakespeare, has used Foucault's approach to discourse analysis to consider power relations in a new way: as generative, the product of discursive action, rather than imposed from above. His research is useful in understanding how cultural icons are made and remade – that texts do not, as in the documentalist tradition, have a single 'correct' meaning but rather are being constantly reinvented by new audiences in new contexts.

Yerbury (2013), on the other hand, explored the continuing marginalisation of women's knowledge in contemporary society, pointing out that this power/knowledge imbalance raises significant ethical questions. She follows Lor & Britz (2005) in arguing "that a moral framework should underpin any attempts to redress inequities in information flows" (2013, 8). The Open Access Movement, which removes the traditional hierarchical barriers to scholarly publishing and economic barriers to the access to scholarly knowledge, is one such framework and Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre has embraced this as a way to address power imbalances in access to research on topics related to cosmopolitanism and civil societies. The establishment of an electronic peer reviewed journal with no entry barriers to potential authors or to potential readers has been significant. Through this move, the

Centre has been successful in removing barriers for readers, as shown by the data on readership and downloads available through Google Analytics. It has also been successful, although to a lesser extent, in providing an avenue for researchers from countries without a strong tradition of scholarly publishing to have their work reviewed and published.

Community and Consensus

The abandonment of the Enlightenment notion that there is universal truth has not led to a chaotic situation where any opinion or spurious fact leads to its general acceptance. Rather, as Buckland (1991) has argued, the notion of consensus arising from community norms and standards has taken its place. While Foucault may argue that this consensus occurs because of the influence of power, others such as Giddens (1984) give agency to members of a society. Cunningham and Wearing (2013) explore consensus decision-making in a residential community, considering the struggle to balance expertise and expectations of community members and relationships with the wider society.

How community should be defined has been a vexed question since the beginnings of the discipline of sociology. The introduction of the internet added to the complexity of this discussion of how to understand community by introducing the idea that community may exist among people who never physically meet (Rheingold 1994, p. 5; Yerbury 2009). Notions of physical co-presence focussed discussion on questions of location, one of the traditional notions of community, people who live and or work together in a geographic space (Arat, Icgasioglu & Polat 2013). The research of members of Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre and others who have published in the Centre's journal have shown that discussions of community cannot be separated from discussions of space and place.

Space and Place

Much of what has been written about contemporary information society has been justifiably criticised as naively techno-centric (Webster, 2006) and it is the case that much of the research is technologically deterministic. It is also the case, that the instantaneous global information transfer capabilities of ICTs has radically transformed society in the past twenty years or so, and one widely held precept of information society discourse is that such

instantaneous communication has rendered physical distance irrelevant. Narayan (2013), for example, has argued for the importance of the internet in providing opportunities for collaborative action without physical contact.

Yet some argue that to construct the virtual world as a separate sphere where physical space is irrelevant is problematic at best as the online world is still defined by its complex inter-relationship with the physical world and with existing communities. Walker (2010), for example, argues that use of the internet is a part of everyday life, and has to be viewed within a broader cultural, social, political and legal context (Walker, 2010, p. 27). Her study set out to “explore the ways in which internet-enabled practices are articulated in local, city and neighborhood specific civic activity” (Walker, 2010, p. 25). Her work provides a timely reminder that even the most ‘wired’ of 21st century citizens are still physical beings, living and working in a geographic location and that to construct virtual communities and social practices in isolation is to fail to appreciate them in their broader socio-political context.

Castells on the other hand argued globalised information technologies have created a networked society, which in turn has led to a profound shift in our relationship with space and time, which he calls the space of flows. He distinguishes this from the space of places, which is constituted through real world time, and where relationships and exchanges are not of themselves channelled through hubs. The space of flows creates a global networked capitalism, where physical distance is effectively irrelevant. Wealth in this new global capitalism is dependant not on the control of physical infrastructure but of information.

Cosmopolitanism

While the notion of ‘cosmopolitanism’ has existed since the time of ancient Greece, it has taken a new turn and been the focus of debate and research in the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre, with a particular focus on its appropriateness as a framework to progress a theoretical understanding of, and a political resolution of, the politics of diversity in contemporary societies. This work has signalled something of a shift away from Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, a space where people exchanged information and where public opinion was formed in a connected way, to a position where researchers are seeking an understanding of ‘a lived cosmopolitanism, which sees individuals of different cultures routinely negotiating across difference in order to coexist within a shared social

space' (Ho et al. 2011). Whereas information and its exchange is at the heart of the public sphere and is central to a state-oriented notion of citizenship, it becomes one of many factors involved in the development of cosmopolitanism as the complexity of lived reality (cosmopolitanism) takes over from an ideal state (the public sphere). It is here that studies of the practices of those usually seen to constitute civil society are important (cf Onyx and Edwards 2010), that is, civil society in its many forms is constituted from community-based organisations, non-government organisations, activists, volunteers, philanthropists, concerned citizens, transnational (internet based) activists among others. Olsson, Heizmann and Yerbury (2013) have argued that a practice-based perspective can provide a useful alternative lens through which to examine issues of active citizenship and community engagement in the context of knowledge management. They argue that people's decision making processes, whether practised in the workplace or elsewhere, are inextricably linked to their discursive context as citizens: the existing knowledge, values, social norms and conventions which underpin their everyday knowledge practices.

The Role of the Researcher

These major meta-theoretical shifts have profound implications for anyone wishing to undertake social research. The view of the researcher as an objective observer 'capturing' and recording the reality of the phenomenon being studied, so dominant in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, is increasingly seen by social scientists as, at best, naïve empiricism, and at worst, as a dangerous reification of existing preconceptions. Consequently, recent decades have seen a steady shift away from objectivist approaches. Research findings become provisional and contingent; the documenting of research methodology is considered important in allowing the reader to understand and evaluate the researchers' discursive position and sense-making processes; and even very small, incremental changes in research findings become important, so new knowledge emerges from the accumulation of small changes. The researcher becomes positioned within the sphere of study, rather than outside.

These changes have led to the adoption of interpretivist frameworks amongst social researchers. Interpretivism recognises that all research is partial, in both senses of the word: even the most rigorous research can only provide an incomplete picture of the phenomenon it studies; furthermore, the findings of any study are inevitably the product of the researcher's worldview, theoretical framework, research practices and so on. Thus interpretivism views

the role of the researcher very differently, acknowledging their active role in the construction of the research narrative while recognising that their practices are embedded in established discursive networks of power/knowledge.

Dervin's 'Sense-Making' (1986) was perhaps the first interpretivist approach to gain widespread currency in information studies. Her approach turned the practice of librarianship on its head, because it undermined the notion of the librarian as expert. In the library-oriented field of practice, the enquirer had the question and the librarian provided the answer. In the user-oriented practice (as it became known), the library user had the question, the librarian provided information and from that, the user constructed an answer relevant to his or her own situation. Dervin was clear that a focus on the information behaviours of individuals would lead only to chaos, so that it was important always to interpret findings to seek a systematising frame. Since then, in information studies, other interpretivist methodologies have emerged including ethnographic approaches such as Chatman's (1991; 1999) *Life in a Small World/Life in the Round* and Pettigrew's (1999) *Information Grounds*, and discourse analytic approaches (e.g. McKenzie, 2002; Olsson 2005a, Heizmann, 2012).

In recent years, amid the tension between the needs and behaviours of individuals and the collective of which they may also form a part, 'practice theory' has begun to emerge as a way of exploring information use which is more than a cognitive activity. This has had the effect of shifting the focus towards embodied uses of information in occupational groups such as such as blue collar workers (Veinot, 2007), firefighters (Lloyd, 2007) and theatre professionals (Olsson, 2010).

The relationship between activist scholarly researchers and their activist partners in the community has become a focus of concern in some parts of the literature on civil society and the development of cohesive societies. Universities have been seen to shift the focus of their research, from a primary mission of creating new knowledge for the sake of new knowledge, to developing a second mission concerned with improving the workings of society and recently to a third mission where university researchers and people from business and industry work together to solve problems of innovation and trade.

Researchers from the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre have placed their emphasis squarely on issues related to improving the workings of society. In this process,

they have pioneered the use of ethnographic techniques of data collection in their research and some have used audio, video and still photography in peer reviewed journal articles which report their findings (Jakubowicz and Moustafine 2010; Pearse, Goodman and Rosewarne 2010; Read and Sukovic 2010). They have grappled with problems of positioning themselves inside the research, (eg Marshall 2010; Yerbury 2011). They have established relationships with activists and noted the ways in which community-based activists devalue their own local knowledge when confronted with the power of institutions and reporting systems (Edwards, Burrige and Yerbury 2013) or used participatory methods to ensure that local knowledges are elicited from community members (Edwards et al. 2012). They have used research methodologies such as discourse analysis which lay bare the power/knowledge relationships in the workings of groups within society (Heizmann, 2012; Olsson, 2013; Walker 2010).

Conclusion

Many aspects of 21st century life – from science and medicine to political and social institutions – bear testimony to the ongoing influence of Enlightenment ideas and principles. Few would dispute that the Enlightenment’s intellectual and ideological legacies have done much to transform our world for the better. Yet at the same time, from post-colonial conflict to global warming, we are also daily confronted with the negative consequences of the Enlightenment quest for ‘progress’. The paradigmatic shifts in the information and social sciences outlined in this article demonstrate researchers’ growing awareness of the need for new conceptual and methodological tools if they are to make sense of the rapidly changing cultural, technological and political landscapes of 21st century cosmopolitan civil society.

The ‘information practices’ turn in information studies (Savolainen. 2007), the emergence of social constructivist approaches to information research drawing on discourse analysis, practice theory and ethnographic theories and methodologies has seen a very different picture of the relationship between people and information emerge over the last decade. Technocentrism and a focus on the purposive information seeking of individuals has begun to be increasingly challenged by a new generation of information researchers seeking to develop a more holistic understanding: one grounded in a growing appreciation of information practices as social, embodied and temporally and geographically located. Articles published in *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an interdisciplinary journal* over its first five years have

charted these profound changes. It will be fascinating to see how writers over the next five years extend and reshape our understanding of the role of information in civil society in the 21st century.

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