

# The Importance of Theory for Information Professionals

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## VIEWPOINT

### *Abstract*

*The author argues that we can easily be swayed by the popular notion of theory as an obtruse pastime for out-of-touch academics from the luxury of their ivory towers and that this is certainly a view we currently hear loudly from populist media outlets and politicians claiming they can fix the world's problems with what they claim is a "common sense" approach. He further argues that such a view is based on a misrepresentation of both theories in the sense that it is used by academic researchers and of the nature of common sense.*

**Keywords:** Theory; Common Sense; Information Professionals

For the busy LIS educator or professional, setting time aside to engage with theory may not seem like something they should prioritise, particular in the middle of a pandemic. In such times as we are living in, we can easily be swayed by the popular notion of theory as an obtruse pastime for out-of-touch academics from the luxury of their ivory towers. This is certainly a view we currently hear loudly from populist media outlets and politicians claiming they can fix the world's problems with what they claim is a "common sense" approach.

In this article, however, I will argue that such a view is based on a misrepresentation of both theories in the sense that it is used by academic researchers and of the nature of common sense. This popularist view is in essence closely related to the common cry of conspiracy theorists that climate change or evolution are "just a theory". This statement is based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of the word theory in the discourses of academic research where a theory must be supported by rigorous (and peer-reviewed) evidence. This is not to imply that existing theories are

perfect. All theories are by their nature limited, the product of human labour and therefore subject to human limitations, biases etc. However, as I shall discuss below, the discursive rules of academic practice (Foucault, 1978) mean that all theories are subject to an ongoing process of challenge, reaffirmation, revision, and rejection based on the ongoing work of researchers and theorists in their field.

Those who valorise "common sense" fail to recognise that it is itself a theory: one based on a combination of personal experience, shared social norms and implicit assumptions. Whilst personal experience and experiential knowledge can provide valuable insights, it also has significant limitations. By its nature, experiential knowledge becomes much less useful when circumstances change. This is something we have all experienced in both our professional and personal lives over the more than two years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the personal biases, contradictions, and assumptions that are an inevitable part of our personal, common-sense worldview are not subject to the same level of peer review and critique as

academic theory and this means we are often not even aware of how they are affecting our work.

Implicit assumptions and biases are not only individual but systemic embedded in the information systems and work practices of libraries, archives, and other collecting institutions. For example, as I have written about extensively in the past (Olsson, 2005; 2009; 2016), the language that we routinely use to describe the people who use libraries and information systems is grounded in problematic assumptions. Whilst the growing influence of a user-centred paradigm (Dervin & Nilan, 1983) in the early 1980s is rightfully regarded as an important step forward in focusing professional and research attention towards people rather than systems, we also need to acknowledge that the term user itself has system-centric origins i.e., library user, system user. Furthermore, as Talja (1997) and Julien (1999) in focusing on constructing users in terms of their “information needs” rather than their existing knowledge and skills, we are creating an implicit power relationship where needy users must seek the aid of authoritative information systems and the LIS professionals who manage them.

One way to recognise how an alternative theoretical lens might allow us a different perspective would be to contrast the narrowness and implicit systems-centrism of such approaches with that adopted by Dervin, one of the progenitors of the user-centred paradigm, in her subsequent work, where she defines sense-making as:

*...embodied in materiality and soaring across time-space ... a body-mind-heart-spirit living in time-space, moving from a past, in a present, to a future, anchored in material conditions; yet at the same time with an assumed capacity to sense-make abstractions, dreams, memories, plans, ambitions, fantasies, stories pretences that can both transcend time space and last beyond specific moments of time space. (Dervin, 1999, p. 730)*

The cultural biases and assumptions built into mainstream approaches in LIS are made even more problematic in a Filipino context as they are the product of a western (largely North American) cultural context quite different from that of the Philippines. As Savolainen (1993) points out, the user-centred paradigm and the cognitivist models of information

seeking it draws on are grounded in “...the basic values of American culture ...the central position of individual actor, the importance of making things happen and moving forward in spite of barriers faced, and relying on individual capacities in problem solving” (p. 26).

Of course, cognitivist theories are not alone in this: all theories and all research are partial in both senses of the word. Firstly, they are partial in that no theoretical or research approach can possibly provide a complete picture of the community or phenomena it considers—the only complete picture of reality is reality itself and human actors can only ever engage with it through their own finite powers of observation and understanding. Secondly, they are partial in that all theories and research are inevitably shaped by the particular interests and cultural assumptions, conscious and unconscious of their creators.

However, in the 21st century, a growing number of information researchers and theorists, particularly those associated with the emerging information practices approach (Savolainen, 2007; Lloyd, 2011; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017), have developed a different approach to theory building in LIS. Drawing on developments in the broader social sciences, such as practice theory (Schatzki, 1996; Gherardi, 2009), information practices researchers reject the notion of “objective knowledge” (Brookes, 1980) and argue that LIS researchers’ long-standing attempts to create so-called general models of human information behaviour (e.g., Wilson, 2000) ignore the extent to which such models are the product of the social context of the researchers or the theorists who create them and of the first world communities they study.

Information practice researchers seek to move beyond LIS’ longstanding focus on “information as thing” (Buckland, 1991) to focus instead on information as a social practice, as can be seen in Lloyd’s definition of information practices:

*An array of information-related activities and skills, constituted, justified and organized through the arrangements of a social site, and mediated socially and materially with the aim of producing shared understanding and mutual agreement about ways of knowing and recognizing how performance is enacted, enabled and constrained in*

*collective situated action.* (Lloyd, 2011, p. 285)

Information practices research has to this point been developed largely by western researchers, non-western information practices research is beginning to emerge (Perera & Olsson, 2020). In acknowledging that information is a social construct and people's relationship with it a product of their cultural practices, information practices offer non-western LIS researchers (perhaps for the first time) a theoretical framework which provides them with conceptual tools to explore how people from different cultural backgrounds make sense of information and create new knowledge in different but equally legitimate ways. I would like to see more Filipino LIS researchers and practitioners adopt (and adapt) an information practices perspective in their own research and professional practice. Such an approach could make a significant contribution not only to the development of the field in the Philippines but to the growth of a more diverse, culturally inclusive LIS worldwide.

The aim of this short article has been to raise awareness of the importance of critical engagement with theory as integral to successful LIS research and practice. As a follow up to this article, I would like to propose a next step in developing the Filipino LIS community's understanding of how to apply theory to their own research practices: that future issues of the journal include a series of follow-up articles written by a range of different LIS researchers in which they explore in more detail how particular theoretical frameworks have informed their own research.

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