

Metatheoretical Snowmen

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OVERVIEW

Metatheory is the highest level conceptual device used in research and determines a way of thinking and speaking about reality and its information phenomena. Today, numerous metatheories exist in information science and create a dynamic climate, yet also some confusion. This panel aims to demystify metatheory by addressing the matter in a playful, comparative, competitive spirit. Articulate champions of five major metatheories will be given an opportunity to cast their metatheory onto the life and information experience of an ordinary and affable persona: a snowman. The vivid renderings of the snowman and its information world will bring the features of each metatheory into clear view. To invigorate both discussants and the audience, the presentations will be judged by a jury appointed on the spot. The panelist who offers the most illuminating exposition takes home a trophy while the audience gains new understanding.


BACKGROUND

Metatheory is, “the philosophy behind the theory, the fundamental set of ideas about how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched” (Bates, 2006, p. 2). A commitment to a metatheory orients research and suggests a methodology and the meaning of major concepts of study. Unlike a field such as physics, that operates within one dominant paradigm, information science is an interdiscipline with many metatheories in play. This has always been the case: 75 years ago, the first textbook on library science tellingly acknowledged sociological, psychological, and historical perspectives (Butler, 1933). Today, Bates has identified 13 metatheories and noted, “we now have a confusion of many approaches competing for attention.” In short, one can glean that metatheory: 1.) Is a critical clarifying device for research. 2.) Leads to different perspectives on information phenomena and, 3.) Is an unruly topic for students and experts alike.

THE PROCESS

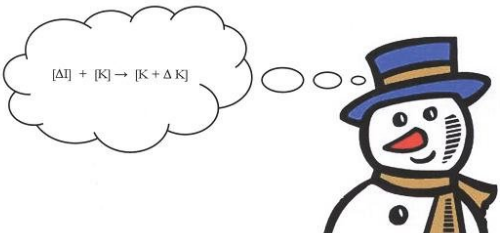
The panel will begin with an introduction to metatheory by the moderator. Then, five thought-leaders of their respective positions will provide succinct (5-minute) overviews of the metatheories they champion and employ. Bibliometrics, constructionism (discourse analysis), socio-cognitivism (domain analysis), Sense-Making and critical theory have been chosen as predominant metatheories. To make these abstract matters accessible to all, and to enable comparison and contrast, discussants will explain their metatheory in the context of a snowman. All presenters will address three fundamental questions from the perspective of their metatheory: 1.) What does the snowman’s reality look like? 2.) What constitutes information for the snowman (and, if appropriate, how is it sought and used)? and, 3.) How is information research conducted in this world? An abbreviated version of the exercise, illustrating the metatheories of pragmatism and cognitivism (not represented in the panel) appears below:

Pragmatism orients to social action



Pragmatism (following John Dewey), sees knowledge as dynamically constructed while solving problems. All activity is social in nature, and should be accomplished democratically. Information is the understanding that exists as a side effect of participation.

Cognitivism orients to the mind



Cognitivism places major emphasis on the way knowledge is built up in the individual mind. Information is defined as that which causes a change in a knowledge structure.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT AND THE SNOWMAN TROPHY

To motivate the panelists, the event is staged as a competition. Which speaker offers the most lucid and compelling presentation? At the beginning of the session, a jury of three judges will be drawn from the audience, composed of an academic, a non-academic, and a student. In real time, the jury will rank each presentation on a scale of 1 (“incomprehensible!”) to 10 (“eureka!”). The presenter with the highest score will be awarded the Snowman Trophy (shown at right) which is held for a year or until the next Metatheoretical Snowmen panel, which will engage a different set of metatheories. At the conclusion of the session, Marcia Bates will provide synthesizing observations. Each speaker will be timed and kept on schedule to allow a minimum of 30 minutes for audience questions and discussion.



THE PANELISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION

Jenna Hartel – Moderator

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Dr. Hartel will launch the session with an introduction to metatheory. She will profile each panelist, assemble the jury, field questions and answers, and keep the event on track.

Howard D. White – Bibliometrics

Professor Emeritus, College of Information Science and Technology, Drexel University

Dr. White will represent bibliometrics, a metatheory in which “the analysis of the statistical properties of information is seen to provide understanding of value for both the design of information provision and the theoretical understanding of social processes around information, including historical processes” (Bates, 2005, p. 13).

Pamela McKenzie – Constructionism (Discourse Analysis)

Associate Professor, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

Dr. McKenzie will address constructionism (discourse analysis), an approach in which “it is assumed that the discourse of a society predominately conditions the responses of individuals within that society, including the social understanding of information” (Bates, 2005, p. 11).

Jens-Erik Mai –Socio-cognitivism (Domain Analysis)

Associate Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Dr. Mai will present socio-cognitivism (domain analysis), a position in which “both the individual’s thinking and the social and documentary domain in which the individual operates are seen to influence the use of information” (Bates, 2005, p. 12).

Paul Solomon – Sense-Making

Associate Professor, School of Library and Information Science, University of South Carolina

Dr. Solomon will address Sense-Making a set of metatheoretic assumptions for understanding how people overcome discontinuity.

Siobhan Stevenson – Critical Theory

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Dr. Stevenson will represent critical theory, an approach in which “the hidden power relations and pattern of domination within a society are revealed and debunked” (Bates, 2005, pp. 11-12).

Marcia J. Bates – Concluding Remarks

Professor Emerita, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

Dr. Bates will provide synthesizing observations and concluding remarks.

The Jury

A jury of three will be drawn from the audience and include an academic, a non-academic, and a student. In real time, the jury will rank each presentation on a scale of 1 (“incomprehensible!”) to 10 (“eureka!”).

WORKS CITED

Bates, M. J. (2005). An Introduction to metatheories, theories, and models. In K. Fisher, S. Erdelez, & L. McKechnie (Eds.), *Theories of information behavior: A researcher's guide* (pp. 1-24). Medford, NJ: Information Today.

Butler, L. P. (1933). *An Introduction to Library Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.