

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 aimed to demystify metatheory by addressing the matter in a playful, comparative, competitive spirit. Articulate champions of five major metatheories were 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 brought the features of each metatheory into clear view. To invigorate both discussants and the audience, the presentations were judged by a jury appointed on the spot. The panelist who offered the most illuminating exposition took home a trophy while the audience gained 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 biology, that operates within one dominant paradigm (the theory of evolution), 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

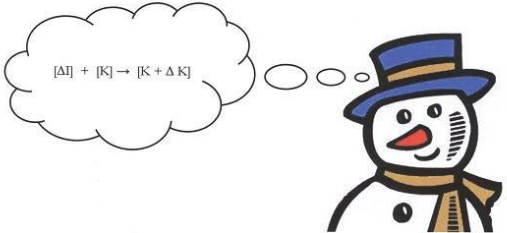
The panel began with an introduction to metatheory by the moderator. Then, five thought-leaders of their respective positions provided succinct (5-minute) overviews of the metatheories they champion and employ. *Philosophical-analytic, cognitivism, domain analysis (socio-cognitivism), pluralism* and *political economy* were chosen as exemplar metatheories. To make these abstract matters accessible to all, and to enable comparison and contrast, discussants explained their metatheory in the context of a snowman. All presenters addressed 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, 3.) How is information research conducted in this world? An abbreviated version of the exercise, illustrating the metatheories of pragmatism and cognitivism 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 was staged as a competition. Which speaker offered the most lucid and compelling presentation? At the beginning of the session, a jury of three judges was drawn from the audience, composed of a senior academic, a junior academic, and a student. In real time, the jury ranked each presentation on a scale of 1 (“incomprehensible!”) to 10 (“eureka!”). The presenter with the highest score was 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, a discussant provided synthesizing observations. Each speaker was 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 launched the session with an introduction to metatheory. She will profile each panelist, assemble the jury, and keep the event on track.

Jonathan Furner – Philosophical-analytic

Associate Professor, Department of Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

Dr. Furner presented the *philosophical-analytic* approach, in which the classical techniques of the discipline of philosophy are brought to bear on information-related matters (Bates, 2005, p. 11).

Ross Todd – Cognitivism

Associate Professor, School of Communication, Information & Library Studies, Rutgers University

Dr. Todd represented *cognitivism*, a metatheory in which “the thinking of the individual person operating in the world is the dominating focus of research on information seeking, retrieval, and use” (Bates, 2005, p. 13).

Birger Hjørland – Domain analysis (Socio-cognitivism)

Professor, Royal School of Library and Information Science

Dr. Hjørland presented *domain analysis (socio-cognitivism)* 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).

Jens-Erik Mai – Pluralism

Associate Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Dr. Mai addressed *pluralism*, a position that challenges unitary meanings and understandings and instead promotes diversity and multiple meanings and understandings of information and categories.

Siobhan Stevenson – Political Economy

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Dr. Stevenson represented the *political economy* perspective, which provides analytic tools and concepts based on Marx’s general theory of capitalism that enhance our ability to interpret and respond to contemporary social, economic, cultural and political conditions associated with the transition to “information” societies.

Steve Fuller – Discussant

Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Warwick

Drawing upon his expertise in scientific knowledge production, Dr. Fuller hosted a discussion and provided concluding remarks.

The Jury

A jury of three was drawn from the audience and included a senior academic, a junior academic, and a student. In real time, the jury ranked each presentation on a scale of 1 (“incomprehensible!”) to 10 (“eureka!”)

THE OUTCOME

Metatheoretical Snowman occurred on the second day of the CoLIS 7 conference at University College in London, England. The jury consisted of Dr. Ian Cornelius (University College, Ireland), Dr. Jutta Haider (Lund University, Sweden), and Edward Benoit III (University of Wisconsin, USA). Doctoral candidate Anna Lundh (Lund University) provided assistance throughout.

The presentations by panelists were a lively blend of insight and good humor, and finished with a confounding, surprise outcome. Dr. Jonathan Furner's statement on the philosophical-analytic approach was awarded a dual score by a judge who deemed it *both* "incomprehensible (1 point) *and* "eureka!--brilliant" (10 points). As a result, depending upon application, Dr. Furner finished either fifth *or* first (or rather fifth *and* first). And so, Dr. Furner shared the Metatheoretical Snowmen trophy with Dr. Stevenson (political economy) who had the second highest score. Interestingly, this was an application of a central tenet of Dr. Mai's metatheory, *pluralism*, which "challenges unitary meanings." In the subsequent commentary, discussant Dr. Fuller highlighted the role that metatheory plays as a "foreign service office" between disciplines, and noted the opportunity for library and information science to reclaim bibliometrics as a critical approach to evaluate scholarly productivity and success. A wide-ranging discussion followed, in which the audience explored, among other things, the role of humor in academic life.

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.