Invited Keynote Talk

The Notion of *Context* in "Information Interaction in Context"

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Abstract

As a process, information interaction is (fairly) well defined; considerable amount of research is devoted to the topic in various areas, particularly in human information behavior and human-computer interaction. In contrast the notion of "context" in which this interaction takes place is ill or not defined and rarely researched – mostly it is taken as a primitive term. Paul Watzlawick (1921-2007) facing a similar issue as to the notion of "communication" formulated five axioms in his theory of communication; the most famous is the first axiom: "***One Cannot Not Communicate (Man kann nicht nicht kommunizieren).***" [1]. Directly following Watzlawick's axioms, this address is an attempt to formulate five axioms related to "context" in information interaction. We start with an assumption that information interaction involves two distinct parties: an information system on the one hand, and an information user (or group of users) on the other hand. Systems and users are partners in interaction. Both have a context, but since there is no interaction without a user (or group), we concentrate here mostly with the user side of the context.

Axiom 1: ***One cannot not have a context in information interaction.*** Every interaction is conducted within a context. . Because context-less information interaction is impossible, it is not possible not to have a context.

Axiom 2: ***Every interaction has a content and relationship aspect – context is the later and classifies the former.*** It means that all interactions, apart from information derived from meaning of words or terms describing the content, have more information to be derived from context.

Axiom 3: ***The nature of information interaction is asymmetric; it involves differing processes and interpretation by parties involved.*** Contexts are asymmetric as well. Systems context is primarily about meanings; user context is primarily about situations.

Axiom 4: ***Context is multilayered. It extends beyond users or systems.*** In interactions it is customary to consider direct context, but context extends indirectly to broader social context also.

Axiom 5: ***Context is not self-revealing, nor is it self-evident.*** Context may be difficult to formulate and synthesize. But plenty can go wrong when not taken into consideration in interactions.

The problem of context is determining the conditions and circumstances that are relevant to a given information interaction; with this, the notion of information interaction context is connected with the notion of relevance in information science.

[1] Watzlawick, P.; Beavin Bavelas, J.; Jackson, D.D. The Pragmatics of Human Communication: a Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes. 1988. London: Norton

Categories & Subject Descriptors:

H.1.2 User/Machine Systems; H.5.2 User Interfaces

General Terms: Human Factors; Theory.

Bio

Tefko Saracevic is Professor II at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA (this is the highest academic rank at Rutgers Univ.) He was Associate Dean 2003 to 2006. Over the years he conducted research and published widely on: test and evaluation of information retrieval systems and digital libraries; notion of relevance in information science; human aspects in human-computer interaction in information retrieval; user and use studies in information science and librarianship; studies of user-derived value of information and library services; and analysis of web queries as submitted to search engines. He has given seminars, lectures and courses, or consulted, and presented papers at international meetings in 46 countries, and was an invited keynote speaker at over a dozen international conferences. He was the president of the American Society for Information Science and received the Society's Award of Merit (the highest award given by the Society). Among other awards, he also received the Gerard Salton Award for Excellence in Research, by the Special Interest Group on Information Retrieval, Association for Computing Machinery (also the highest award given by the Group). As of May. 2010 he has received 1285 citations to his works in Social SciSearch (Social Sciences Citation Index, 1972 -), and SciSearch (Science Citation Index, 1974 -) online databases, excluding self citations, i.e. these are all citations to his works by other authors.

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