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# The Case against Information and the Body in Library and Information Science

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What follows is an editorial that makes a case *against* the development of an empirical research frontier in library and information science (LIS) devoted to information and the body. My goal is to offer a sober and constructive counterbalance to this *Library Trends* special issue that is otherwise uncritical of its proposition. In asserting that original research into embodied information may be unproductive for our field, I draw from my personal experience and reflections as well as foundational conceptions of LIS from past and contemporary luminaries. My conclusion reminds all stakeholders in this *Library Trends* special issue of the many fascinating and urgent research questions that remain unanswered within the conventional boundaries of LIS.<sup>1</sup>

In 2003 I was a doctoral student at the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, and happily learning information behavior under Marcia Bates. I enrolled in a methodology seminar offered through the Sociology Department entitled *Ethnography, Ethnomethodology, and Symbolic Interactionism*, taught by the late Melvin Pollner. Our class read a book-length ethnography of one sociologist's experience as the paid caretaker of a teenage girl living with severe mental and motor impairments; the study reported the sexual way the child pressed her body against her older, male assistant during their daily routine and the inexorable sexual response of *his* body—two haptic forms of embodied information. The aspiring sociologists and anthropologists in the course found these microsocial physical dynamics to be riveting and discussed their meaning for two hours. The next week our enlightened professor assigned an article by Lucy Suchman about the coordinated flow of information via documents in a workplace—a brilliant paper. To my surprise, my classmates were dismissive of Suchman's study. One budding sociologist remarked, "Well, the research design is solid, but it's all about these

*documents*. I mean . . . who really cares?" This flippant criticism left me speechless, while everyone else in the class laughed in agreement (excepting the magnanimous Dr. Pollner).

To me the anecdote above is loaded with meaning for this special issue. For starters, other social sciences have long histories of studying what we are now in LIS discovering as embodied information. The German sociologist Norbert Elias's (1939) ground-breaking analysis of table manners (including blowing one's nose and spitting) established a research tradition within sociology that is centered on the body. Similarly, anthropology is home to subdisciplines devoted to research into body language and gesture (*kinesics*), the body in space (*proxemics*), touch (*haptics*), the experience of time (*chronemics*), and the use of vision (*oculesics*), and it goes without saying that these corporeal phenomena are seen as informative and communicatory. The aforementioned disciplines have well-developed theoretical and methodological tools to describe these bodily functions and to explain them through lenses of history, sociality, and culture. Hence, any LIS scholar interested in information and the body is a latecomer to a mature research domain; has much catching-up to do; and risks reinventing the wheel.

Another notable aspect of the story above is that certain phenomena—namely, the relationship between human beings and recorded knowledge—are deemed *not* compelling or research-worthy by other social sciences and are eschewed. The precocious protosociologist in my story sounded almost allergic to paper. Indeed, LIS stands as the resident expert and overseer of the universe of recorded knowledge, and there are no significant contenders, a chance blessing that should be leveraged and celebrated by LIS. On the library side, this authority dates to 2000 BC and the clay tablets in the palace at Nineveh. The information science side has roots in the European documentation movement of a century ago. Later luminaries have continued to position LIS as the singular mediator between people and the documentary realm. Jesse Shera proclaimed that the library brought humankind and the graphic record into harmonious relations. Howard White positioned LIS at the intersection of people and literatures. Marcia Bates cast LIS as a metadiscipline charged with the transmission of and access to recorded knowledge. Why turn our attention away from a nexus that is historically and rightly ours alone at a time when the graphic record is more manifold, inspiring, and dangerous than ever?

Reflexivity is the act of examining oneself as a researcher, and it is an essential element of the inquiry process. Before the next generation of scholars turns their attention to the frontier of information and the body, a few self-searching questions are warranted. Why have most studies of information behavior not been deemed useful to other disciplines or professional practice? Why does LIS still lack broad, explanatory, predictive

theories about information behaviors of students, academics, knowledge workers, people in crisis, and leisure enthusiasts, among others? Why are the important areas of information use and creation still largely unexamined? Honest answers to these questions suggest that there remains *a lot* of work to do on the home front of LIS before pursuing intriguing topics abroad.

*Why* are LIS scholars interested in information and the body anyways? The answer may have to do with fashion and novelty. A lot of research nowadays follows theoretical and methodological trends that cut across disciplines. These “turns” are exciting, seductive, and offer a fresh perspective, thereby drawing research agendas away from native framings and unanswered questions from one’s home discipline. Within the relatively short span of my own academic career, I have witnessed a cognitive turn, linguistic turn, everyday life turn, and practice turn. The special issue at hand heralds the embodied turn. Problematically, following turns extends the breadth and diversity of LIS research but does not generate coherence and depth.

If scholars in our field are restless for something new, why not *re*-discover the fragmented central concepts of LIS, that is, information behavior, retrieval, and organization? Most studies today are focused on only *one* of these domains and place the other two outside the scope—though all three are co-constructed and interdependent. Concerning integration, we have lost ground from our predecessors. Tefko Saracevic, Marcia Bates, Tom Wilson, Raya Fidel, Carol Kuhlthau, and Howard White (among others) could connect the dots *across* our signal troika and deliver more satisfying and complete understandings of information phenomena.

My 2007 dissertation on information in the hobby of gourmet cooking opens with a remark from Paul Otlet: “*A taste of something is a document.*” Placing this flirtatious allusion to embodied information aside, my dissertation convinced me of the richness and complexity of the documentary realm and the many mysteries it still withholds from researchers in LIS. After seven years of fieldwork on the print formats within personal culinary collections, I had gained a fulsome understanding of their production and use by hobbyists in a domestic setting. However, I felt I had only scratched the surface, and there were untold big, outstanding questions. What can explain the intriguing aesthetic, affective, and social dimensions of culinary documents? How do print formats relate to their digital counterparts and vice-versa? In what ways are new genres such as the culinary blog and instructional video remaking this information environment? Why do gourmet cooks defy the principle of least effort, the most enduring theory of information behavior? How do domestic organizing systems used by gourmet cooks relate to the classification systems within information institutions? Following Egan and Shera’s social epistemology, how is culinary knowledge constructed and reconstructed, not only by cooks but by all

the participants in the hobby social world? Can the resulting insights be applied to improve information access and use within the culinary domain and beyond? Only library and information science *as originally formulated* has the mandate and knowledge to answer these still relevant questions, as long as we are not carried away by our bodies.

## NOTE

1. In this editorial I offer an alternative perspective on the value of research into information and the body in LIS. At the same time, my own study of information in the hobby of gourmet cooking documented the social dimensions of culinary knowledge as well as the informational role of sight, taste, smell, and touch when cooking. I am able to see “information and the body” as both an opportunity and a problem.

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Dr. Jenna Hartel is an associate professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. Her work aims to be an imaginative, energetic, and committed form of intervention in the field of library and information science (LIS). She believes a different character of LIS is possible, one that moves beyond pragmatic concerns with information resources and technologies to consider positive and upbeat information phenomena across the entire human experience. Dr. Hartel has committed herself to promoting that vision through research into information within leisure, pleasurable, and profound contexts. To the same end, her ideas are expressed and packaged in nonstandard forms of presentation that are playful and accessible to all. She hopes to be a catalyst, endeavoring to inspire and encourage the field of LIS to explore new areas, import new methods, break out of traditional boxes in which it conducts its research, and entertain new possibilities.