When our data don't fit the concepts

In the evidence-based approach to contemporary professional practice and indeed to aspects of everyday life, we are constantly measuring and matching. Indicators for social and physical conditions in society are continually accepted or challenged in the media and in this process, a communal understanding of the significance and priority of each condition is reached. In our research into information behaviours, the approach is similar. Our communal understanding is encoded in the epistemologies and concepts we use and our purposes in carrying out research are usually to refine or extend or to re-interpret through new sets of observations. We tend to take this communal understanding as a universal, expecting that whatever the context of our study our conceptual frame will stand and it is the novelty of our context or our research method that will bring new insights. Thus, when our data do not fit the concepts, our first reaction is to test for some flaw in definition, data collection or analysis, assuming the problem to be in the application of the concept and the processes of observation rather than in the concept itself.

This paper examines the processes involved in making sense of the data collected in a study of the information behaviours of young Rwandans, active in civil society online. This study, carried out in 2011, was intended to extend a study carried out in Australia and completed in 2009. The Australian study had extended the understanding of social capital in the context of civil society online and it had confirmed that the online forums and discussion boards of civil society organisations were significant sites for sharing information, trying out ideas and even for creating identity. The data from the Rwandan study appeared not to match indicators for social capital, even from studies carried out Rwanda. Social capital is so often considered a universal concept that this was a surprise. Another anomaly arose – the young Rwandans did not engage online with others whom they did not know, whereas the young Australians had no problem with doing this and many sought to establish relationships with people they did not know. In different ways, these anomalies became the focus of other investigations, working backwards from the data. The discovery-oriented method of abduction was particularly useful in interpreting the data surrounding the second anomaly, the lack of involvement of young Rwandans online with others whom they did not know, and coming to an explanation of the contextual factors, particular to Rwanda at the time, which influenced information behaviours.

The outcome of this work suggests that there are dangers inherent in building research and practice on western cultural values and assumptions. The paper concludes with a consideration of some of these dangers and how their effects might be minimised.