

Making Sense in Everyday Life

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Historically, information researchers have largely focussed their research on purposive information seeking in professional and academic contexts. Analyses of the literature (Julien et. al, 2011; Savolainen, 2007) indicate that such research still makes up the overwhelming majority of information behaviour research. Olsson (2009) has argued that this narrow focus reflects the perceived interests of the information professions. It has also, he argues, led to a high level of implicit systems-centrism underpinning much research in the (supposedly) user-centred paradigm (Dervin & Nilan, 1986).

The last decade has seen a growing number of studies exploring information behaviour and practices in non-work environments, including online discussion boards (Godbold, 2013; Walker, 2010) gourmet cooking (Hartel, 2010), knitting (Prigoda & McKenzie 2007) and personal time management (McKenzie et. al, 2014). One major challenge facing the growth of research in this area is the question of the suitability of prevailing theoretical and methodological approaches in the field to address the challenges of researching everyday life information practices.

This paper will argue that Dervin's Sense-Making offers a suitable conceptual and methodological basis for studying everyday life information practices. Although often seen by information researchers as a theory about information seeking, Dervin herself positions it more holistically, arguing that sense-making must be seen as:

...embodied in materiality and soaring across time-space ... a body-mind-heart-spirit living in time-space, moving from a past, in a present, to a future, anchored in material conditions;... (Dervin, 1999, 730)

The paper will illustrate how Sense-Making might be applied to everyday life information practices by drawing on the findings of studies carried out by the authors in a range of contexts: enthusiasts car restorers (Olsson); art gallery volunteer guides (Ferrara) and fitness tracker users (Tucker). Although differing in details of its application, all three studies used Dervin's Sense-Making as the basis for their conceptual and methodological approaches.

For Ferrara, Sense-Making provided a means by which to understand the preparation of volunteer guides tasked with leading a tour of an exhibition for the general public. Fundamental to this approach is an acknowledgement of the expertise of the user. In this case, guides were given space to articulate their needs in relation to information and training. The holistic nature of Sense-Making also allowed for an exploration of experiential learning practices in this context.

Tucker applied Sense-Making to investigate the inspirations, experiences and typical daily behaviour of fitness tracker users. Curiosity and fitness goals motivated the users to interact with their devices' features and functions, which lead them to encounter contrasting instances of glee and discontinuity.

Sense-Making provided an approach to explore how these disruptions altered their usage or lead to the abandonment of their devices.

Olsson has used Sense-Making to explore the life-world of car enthusiasts' sense-making as they undertake the restoration of their classic cars. Sense-Making offered a conceptual framework to move beyond a narrow focus on information seeking to explore participants' sense-making as a journey and to explore the central role of social, affective and embodied factors as an integral part of the sense-making process.

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