

INFORMATION NEEDS OF AND SEEKING INFORMATION ON THE PARANORMAL: Research Scheme

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Background

This study examines people's everyday life and, more precisely, their information seeking behaviour when either (a) seeking information on paranormal or psychic phenomena or (b) using psychic means to find information. The author wishes to emphasize that no position whatsoever is taken here in whether these paranormal phenomena actually exist or not. The results of this study will almost solely be based on the research subjects' own accounts of their experiences, and therefore it is not expected that they can prove or disprove the existence of paranormal phenomena.

This study is in the line of the "new paradigm" of library and information science; that is, the focus is on the individual, not on the system. The individual's information seeking behaviour is seen as affected mainly by two groups of factors: 1) the properties of a situation and 2) the characteristics of the individual. The former group is mainly looked at from the point of view of Brenda Dervin's (and others') sense-making theory. The latter group of factors is examined according to Reijo Savolainen's framework of everyday information seeking.

Two theories

Among the principal thoughts of sense-making theory are: 1) the individual's life is discontinuous, i.e. life is not steady walking onwards along a road, but 2) interspersed with gaps (problems or instances of lack of information) which may have to be filled or bridged if the individual wants to carry on with his life. Gaps always occur in a certain situation, and this situation as well as the gap faced by the individual are examined as perceived by him, not by the researcher. The gap is bridged when the

individual finds relevant information which enables him to cross the gap and remove (or at least relieve) the problem. This situation-gap-use triangle is the underlying foundation of sense-making theory. (Dervin 1992)

Savolainen's framework of everyday information seeking is premised on altogether different ideas. Sense-making theory is predominantly interested in the various aspects of a situation and the individual in it, whereas Savolainen's theory focuses on the social aspects of the individual's life and their effect on his seeking information. The two basic concepts in this framework are "the way of life" and "controlling life". The way of life refers to the cognitive order of matters in the individuals mind, and is reflected by his 1) allocation of time to working time and leisure time, 2) consumption of goods, and 3) hobbies. Controlling life means that the individual more or less constantly strives to keep things in the order in which they are in his mind. A major aspect of controlling life is solving everyday problems. The way in which these problems are solved and thus information sought depends directly not only on the situational factors, but also on the cognitive style of the individual (Savolainen has distinguished four of these), his basic style of controlling his life. Both the way of life and controlling life are affected by more general factors such as the individual's conception of the world, his social class, financial capital, social capital, mental capital, age, and health. (Savolainen 1993, Savolainen 1995)

Objectives

The author intends to merge these two theories into one coherent theory and study seeking information on the paranormal within this new framework, which is the main objective of this research project. Other objectives of this study are to:

- 1) Chart the various information needs of the paranormal phenomena.
- 2) Find out which channels (information sources and information providers) people use when satisfying these needs.
- 3) Find out what differences there are between the anticipated use and the actual use of these channels. What barriers are there when seeking information on the paranormal?
- 4) Find out in which type of situations the individual's cognitive style accounts better for his information seeking behaviour than the situation itself, and vice versa.
- 5) Form a holistic picture of the individuals' information needs of and seeking information on paranormal phenomena, and generalize this to the population of the study.
- 6) Indirectly increase and promote scientific research on paranormal phenomena which is - particularly in Finland - still relatively "virginal", but, in my opinion (perhaps precisely because of this), rather fruitful field of inquiry.

Research population and methods

The population of this study is the readership of Ultra, the widest-spread, the most holistic, and one of the first magazines about the paranormal to be published in Finland. Today it is 20 years of age, and it has about 6,700 subscribers plus an unknown number of buyers of monthly issues in shops, kiosks etc.

The research project is divided into two overlapping stages. At the first stage, a mail survey was carried out. An eight-page questionnaire was mailed to all readers of Ultra who were willing to participate, and the form was also handed out at various happenings and meetings on paranormal phenomena during the summer. The objective is to get back at least 500 filled-in questionnaires. At the second stage, chronologically overlapping the survey, interviews were done with some respondents who had already filled in the questionnaire. The aim is to find from 15 to 20 people to take part in the interview. The questions in the survey form focus on Savolainen's framework of everyday information seeking (how information on the paranormal is usually sought), and correspondingly the interviews are based on Dervin's sense-making conception (how information is sought in a given situation).

The research material of the survey is explored in the author's forthcoming master's thesis, and the material acquired through the interviews will hopefully be analyzed in a graduate study (perhaps even in the licentiate's dissertation). Until then, the synthesis of the results of the survey and the interviews will have to wait. Therefore only the objectives #1, #2, #3, and #6 outlined above can be realized even partially in the master's thesis.

It would also be interesting to study information seeking on the paranormal in an organizational context, but that is an altogether different story.

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