

The Process Of Information Action In The Context Of The Paranormal¹

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The proper place for scientists — once in a while at least — is in the midst of the unknown, the chaotic, the dimly seen, the unmanageable, the mysterious, the not-yet-well-phrased.

(Abraham Maslow, 1987)

These words from one of the greatest psychologists in the 20th century are a particularly apt description of the scholarly work that is being discussed here. My doctoral thesis namely explores the process of information action in the context of interest in paranormal phenomena as an instance of a leisure time venture which is an obscure area in information studies. The topic was chosen for two reasons: on one hand, pursuing the supernatural — or any other hobby for that matter — is a domain on which research has been virtually nonexistent in information studies so far. On the other hand, the contemporary conceptualisations of information behaviour and sense-making were deemed insufficient and thus requiring further development through empirical investigation, so that they would be better suited to examining processes and free time activities.

This piece of research looks at needs, seeking and outcomes of information concerning the paranormal — as well as barriers to these — in real-life situations, as experienced by people who are keen on the supernatural. The features that centrally characterise the study are its focus on the individual, situation, and process. Special attention is paid to paranormal meanings that are given to things in everyday information-related activities. This is facilitated by taking Brenda Dervin's (e.g. 1983, 1992, 1999) Sense-Making theory as a metatheory or background theory for the study. Owing to the phenomenological approach and the as-yet disputed nature of supernatural phenomena (see Lehmann & Myers 1989, 378), the study does not take any stand whatsoever on their existence.

What are the basic concepts in the study?

These are process, sense-making, information, knowledge, information action, paranormal phenomenon, and paranormal information. Of these, I will only introduce those whose meaning is not immediately obvious, so that everybody is clear on what I am talking about. Jaana Venkula (1988, 9, 10) defines *process* as "a series of acts and events" during which a change can be detected and which usually has a purpose. In Dervin's Sense-Making approach, *sense-making* is action in

¹ This paper is a slightly modified version of the *lectio praecursoria* which I delivered at my doctoral defence on 5 October 2001 in Tampere. See the dissertation (Kari 2001) for much more information.

which the person creates meaningful structures of sense that enable him to continue his movement through time and space that has halted for some reason (Waldron & Dervin 1988, according to Tuominen 1994, 65). Simply speaking, "sense-making" imports getting a comprehension of or attributing meanings to something.

At its broadest, one can state that *information action* is a process in which the individual performs meaningful deeds in relation to information and knowledge in order to achieve something. In this thesis, however, information action is viewed through an information seeker's eyes. The content of information action is therefore conceived as five stages — situation, information need, information source, obtained information, and information outcome — as well as a factor having an adverse effect on information seeking: barrier. The process of information action is basically envisaged as comprising of the five phases.

Probably the most typical way to demarcate *paranormal* or *supernatural phenomenon* is to regard it as a hypothetical phenomenon which contradicts today's scientific conception of the world (see Alcock 1981, 3; Alcock 1991, 151; Collins & Pinch 1979, 238; Kurtz 1985, 504), on the one hand, and the expectations of common sense and our everyday experiences (Gordon 1992, 2; Kurtz 1985, 504; Schumaker 1987, 451; Tobacyk & Milford 1983, 1029), on the other hand. I call information pertaining to paranormal phenomena *paranormal information* — or "rajatieto" in Finnish. This information may be about the paranormal (Weisen 1990, 20), may supposedly have been acquired by supernatural means (Heikkilä 1998, 74; Thalbourne & Delin 1994, 24), or may be considered as originating with a paranormal source (see Varto & Veenkivi 1998, 24).

How was the investigation carried out?

The research data was gathered by taping the interviews of 16 people interested in paranormal phenomena. The interviews were conducted in South Finland in 1995, except for one that was done in 1998. The specific method of data collection was an application of the so-called micro-moment time-line interview which is the core method of Sense-Making (see Dervin 1983, 10; Dervin 1989, 77; Dervin 1992, 70; Savolainen 1993, 24). This technique involves charting chains of events, as they happened according to the interviewees. The material thus acquired was transcribed in detail, minutely coded in a qualitative data analysis program, analysed qualitatively to find categories and patterns, as well as investigated quantitatively in order to determine distributions and relationships between variables.

What were the major results?

The empirical findings can be crystallized into the following cardinal points. *One*: the situation in which information action took place could itself be perceived as involving supernatural phenomena. *Two*: information was required about both normal and paranormal issues, but in fact, mostly about normal matters. *Three*: some people consulted information sources which they regarded as paranormal. *Four*: information could seemingly be obtained via supernatural modes of communication. *Five*: paranormal information was usually felt helpful. *Six*: barriers to seeking supernatural information were relatively uncommon, but when they did arise, they were probably

related to the individual himself. *Seven*: two fundamental process dimensions — unit and scope — were identified. It appears that the essence — but not process — of information action in the context of the paranormal differs from normal information action in many important respects, although they have their similarities, as well.

What is the role of the paranormal?

The study began as an examination of seeking information on paranormal phenomena. The long process of empirical work, however, drastically changed the research setting. It turned out that confining the paranormal to information alone was totally inadequate, for among the people interviewed, supernatural aspects — both abstractions and phenomena — could be perceived at virtually any stage of the process of information action. Therefore, it is befitting to discuss the observed role of the paranormal in situations, needs, sources, information, outcomes and barriers.

As the findings demonstrate, a *situation* can be seen as embracing supernatural phenomena. Since circumstances experienced as partially paranormal present to the actor a reality that contains something more than the consensus reality, I would suggest that reportedly paranormal situations function as triggers that set off information action that is different from that started by normal conditions.

An *information need* may exhibit a paranormal trait in its topic or Time Focus. Here, the role of the supernatural is apparently limited to guiding the process of information seeking beyond conventional themes.

An *information source*, on the other hand, may be reckoned as possessing supernatural talents, be perceived as a paranormal entity, or finding it may be attributed to "higher forces". Some specialists in the paranormal are apparently regarded as having access to sources or channels and information that are out of ordinary people's reach. Unearthly beings from other worlds or higher realms are perhaps thought to be aware of a much wider reality than humans are, and therefore they may be deemed able to impart information that cannot be found in any standard sources. A more elusive contribution of the paranormal is considered to be the invisible help in locating pertinent sources.

Like a need, acquired *information* can comprise paranormal aspects in its topic or Time Focus, but also in the method of reception. The content of the communication concerning a supernatural issue or time can be regarded as salient in that it enlightens the actor on matters which are not catered for by normal information, and facilitates action which might not be feasible to take on the basis of "ordinary" information. Paranormal modes of information reception appear to have an essential function: without them, access to certain (especially supernatural) sources would be in the main judged impossible.

An *outcome of information* procurement may sometimes be regarded as supernatural information utilization. Even though uses of this kind seem to be rare, I would still propose that their peculiarity is in apparently allowing people to accomplish things which they could not achieve by normal means.

Finally, a *barrier to information seeking* may prevent the individual from getting into contact with the alleged supernatural world, albeit this is evidently exceptional. In other words, it is not paranormal phenomena as such which are seen as inhibiting information action, but rather one's own natural limitedness is a hindrance to some. In that case, the crux of the matter supposedly lies in penetrating the boundary between nature and supernature.

The overall pattern of the supernatural manifesting itself in information action could be characterized as "dipping high" (see Figure 1): a normal situation gives rise to a need for information on normal things, which in turn leads to the acquisition of paranormal information, which results in using the knowledge in a normal manner. That is to say, unearthly help is seemingly got with earthly affairs. There were naturally variations on the pattern, but this was evidently the prevailing course.

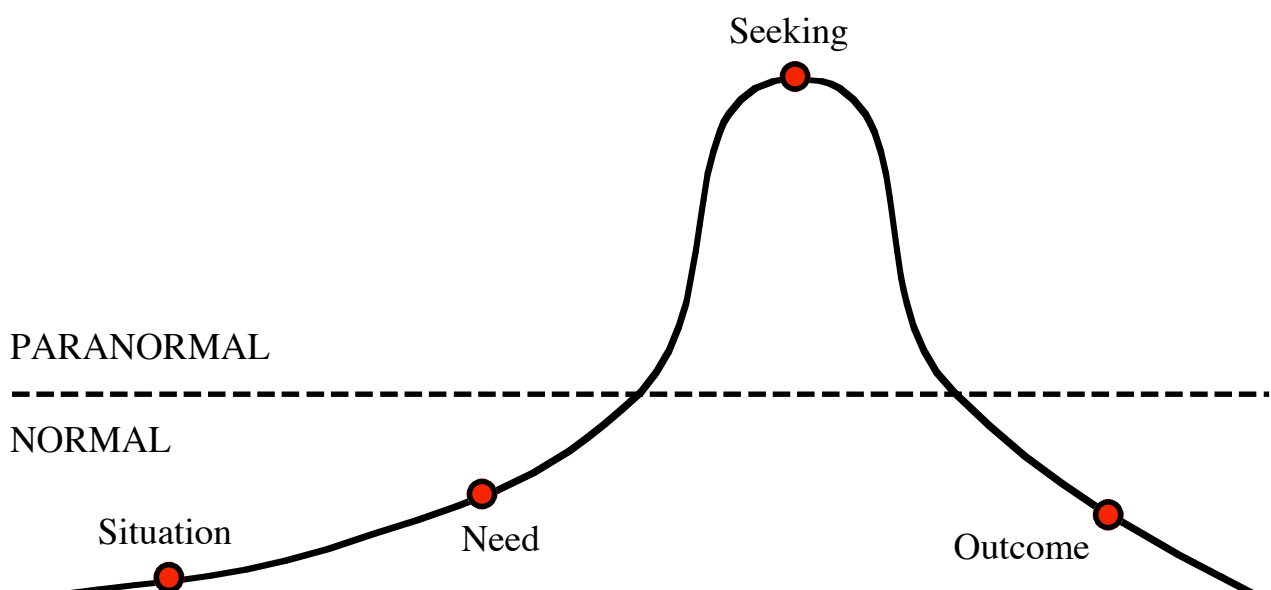


FIGURE 1. Dominant pattern of perceived paranormality in information action

Although the paranormal did not appear to be the statistically dominating category in any of the five stages (or the barriers) of information action, its significance was strikingly highlighted by the informants. Supernature was cherished as something very special by many, both as a personal experience and as a channel of precious information. All in all, the paranormal was evidently seen as an instrument capable of bridging gaps that could not be bridged well or at all in a normal manner. From the reverse point of view, it appears the supernatural was not resorted to when normal methods were considered as sufficient. There was no lucid sign of a competitive position or a point of convergence at which the normal and paranormal would have had to struggle for cognitive reign. Hence, it can be maintained that the paranormal is not perceived as an alternative but a complement to the normal, for they each seem to have their own area of relevancy and role to play in information action. In the final analysis, the power of supernature appears to boil down to its ability to make the world more understandable and life less troublesome, at least for some people.

It is also evident that the sphere of the paranormal is not an area of interest like any other. The supernatural is not just an object of action, but in all likelihood, it actually tends to define how the

person perceives reality itself, too. It is a potentiality that this image is fundamentally different from the materialistic picture of the world. This hints at the possibility that the "rules" of normal information action may not apply so well in the context in question.

What theoretical contributions does the dissertation make?

The piece of research at hand introduces a great many novel categories, several subconcepts, and even three basic concepts. Some of the constructs specifically deal with the paranormal, but most of them are pertinent to the wider context of people's everyday life, leisure time, interests, and hobbies. The most central theoretical implications for information seeking research in general are the following. *One*: the motivations behind searching for information are much more heterogeneous than presumed by the rationalistic "school of problem-solving". *Two*: the questions representing information needs are more versatile than what has been believed to date. *Three*: the present-day scientific endeavour in our field pays inordinate attention to documentary and especially electronic sources and systems, at the cost of personal and less technical originators and providers of information. *Four*: exploring the perceptual potentiality of the human being for obtaining and processing information has been forgotten in information studies. *Five*: it is proposed that the previously ambiguous "information use" is relegated to the subordination of the more general "information outcome". This is a process whose other "substage" is information effect. *Six*: barriers do not disturb information seeking only, but can emerge in any phase of the process. *Seven*: it was found that the process of information action is a complex, non-linear and multilevel phenomenon. Many of the categories and concepts in the current investigation can be exploited not only in information studies, but also in Sense-Making research.

As a whole, the concepts and their interrelationships constitute a framework which pertains to three theoretical perspectives: information action, process, and sense-making. The thesis advises the scholarly community to replace the mechanistic term of "information behaviour" with that of "information action" which underlines the intentionality of human existence. The study develops a model of process, as well, which outlines the processes of information seeking and action in considerable depth and width. The Sense-Making theory is not spared from revisions, either, which principally concern the concepts of gap-bridging and use. The greatest theoretical merit of this piece of research is, I believe, that of contributing to our understanding of information action as a genuine process. Among other things, this conceptualization has consequences for the methodology of information seeking research.

The model of *information action* assumes by default that the actor is in the role of information seeker. Yet, there are other roles — like receiver, mediator, interpreter, guide, facilitator and source/producer — in which the individual can be regarded as acting informationally, too. What is more, the actor does not have to be a person — like in the present study — but it can also be a group, organization (see de Tocqueville 1969, according to Healy 1997, 63) or even society. This hypothesis comes directly from Sense-Making. People can and do bring into existence social structures that act as entities of a higher order, and which are hence more than just the sum of their members.

Thus, the scope of information action potentially extends to the entire phenomenal world of information studies, but not farther than that. That is, information action includes all activity which involves information and knowledge (a sense associated with the information), but excludes activity that has no connection with information, like the act of mere observing.

The empirical results and theoretical meditations brought out many quintessential features in the *process* of information action. These can be expressed as a list of key words: multiplicity, complexity, sequence, non-linearity, parallelism, cyclism, open-endedness, relativity, connectedness, interaction, embeddedness, infinity, change, tension and nondeterminism. Progressions exhibit immense multiplicity in their content and form. The process is inherently complex, to a degree bordering on apparent chaos. The findings signal that the process of information action is nowhere near as simple as what has been heretofore believed. It usually advances as a sequence, but is often at the same time non-linear. This is manifest especially in the parallel spots and cyclical qualities of the course. The progression is open-ended, for it has no predefined point of inception or resolution.

The course is not absolute, but relative to others. According to Venkula, processes only end in a formal sense. In reality, one process and its results are always a starting point for another process. To put it more accurately, one process is either an antecedent or part of another process. (Venkula 1988, 10.) If the process were studied carefully, the observer would probably notice that it is invariably connected to other processes. This association may take the form of interaction between parallel progressions. A smaller process is generally embedded in a larger process, which is embedded in an even bigger process, and so forth, which eventually produces a kind of fractal pattern of nested processes whose scale ranges from infinitely diminutive to infinitely enormous. In essence, then, the course may extend to infinitude like the universe itself.

The axiomatic kernel of the process is change. This is presumably brought about by the tension between what is and what the actor thinks should be. The anticipated outcome does not, however, automatically decide the course of the process, because it involves nondeterminism or haphazardness. These peculiarities of process present a difficult challenge to information research.

As far as I know, the current doctoral dissertation is up to now the second study to develop a model (see Figure 2) of information seeking specifically founded on the *Sense-Making* metatheory. Since the first framework by David Halpern and Michael Nilan (1988, 175) was inadequate for the present piece of research, a more suitable formal Sense-Making theory had to be derived from its metatheoretical counterpart. However, the model of information action half draws on information seeking research, so it is not pure Sense-Making. Hence, the formal theory describes phenomena in a particular field of inquiry, and yet retains its grounding on the metatheory. The coexistence of the Sense-Making theory and information action model has given rise to an illuminating cross fertilization of sorts which has not resulted in the unification of the two, for they both have their own place. Rather, the two frames of reference have together contributed to understanding both of them from each other's angle.

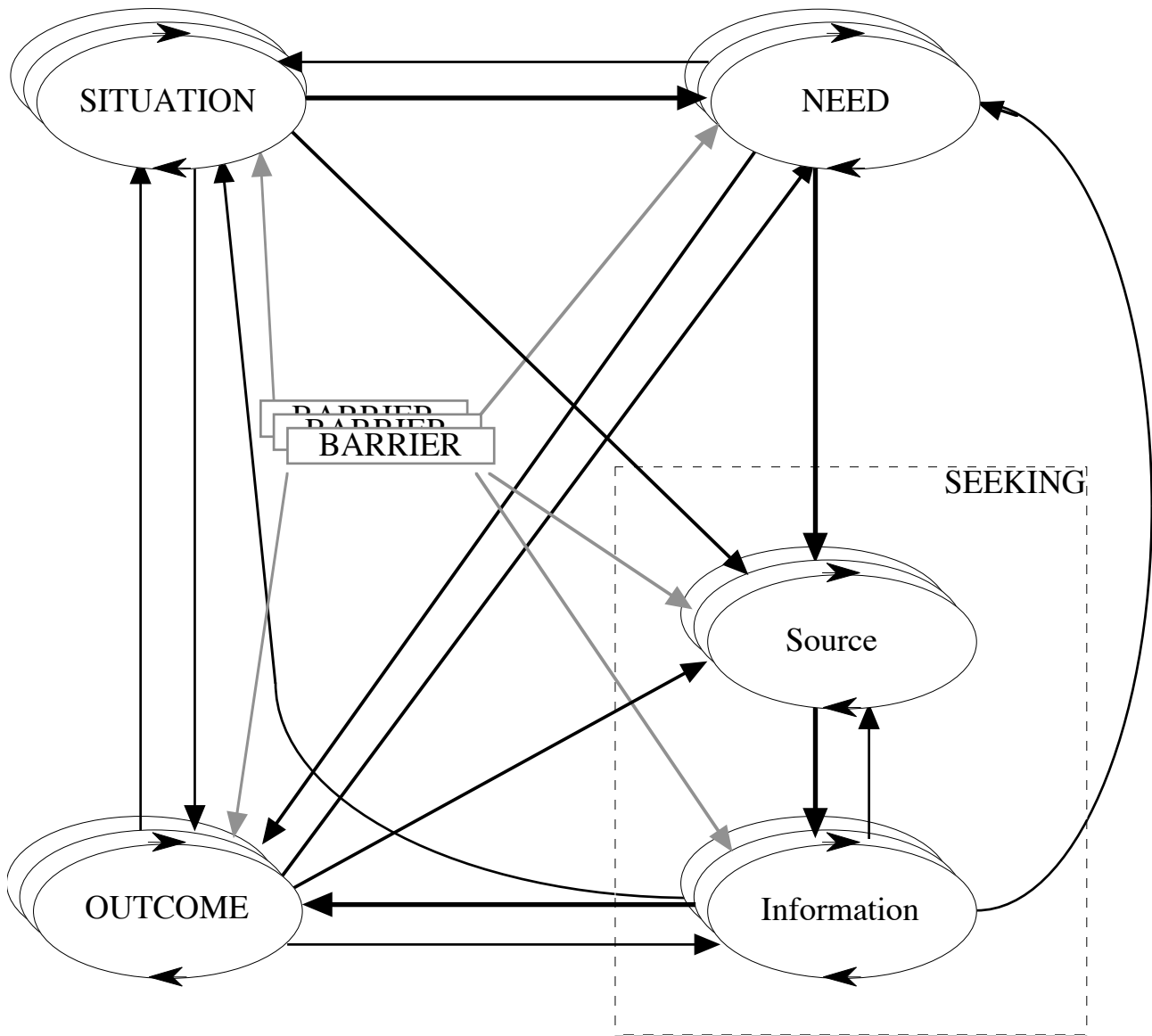


FIGURE 2. Refined general process model of situational information action

On the whole, one may notice that this dissertation has started out to evolve Sense-Making in just the opposite direction than the creator of the approach — Brenda Dervin — in her recent work. Where Dervin aims at generalizing the ontological and epistemological presumptions of the methodology to all human communication, I strive for specifying the metatheory to deal with information action. On the other hand, universal models of information seeking are typically not based on clearly articulated assumptions about the nature of information, communication or the subject. In this respect, they differ from the process model of information action elaborated in the current thesis. Thus, the middle-range framework herein embodies quite a welcome departure from both traditions.

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