

Reports of the demise of the "user" have been greatly exaggerated: Dervin's Sense-Making and the methodological resuscitation of the user -- looking backwards, looking forward

Sponsored by SIG/USE and SIG/HFIS

Brenda Dervin

School of Communication, Ohio State University, 3016 Derby Hall, 154 N.Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210. dervin.1@osu.edu

Karen E. Fisher

The Information School, Suite 370, Mary Gates Hall, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195. fisher@u.washington.edu

Joan Durrance

School of Information, 3084 West Hall Connector, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109 . durrance@umich.edu

Catherine Ross

Faculty of Information and Media Studies, North Campus Building, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada, N6A 5B7. ross@uwo.ca

Reijo Savolainen

Department of Information Studies, University of Tampere, FIN-33014, Tampere, Finland. reijo.savolainen@uta.fi

Paul Solomon

School of Information and Library Science, 212 Manning Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599. solomon@ils.unc.edu

In 2003, an ASIST panel (Rosenbaum, Davenport, Lieuvrouw, Day, 2003) pronounced the "death of the user" suggesting that new technologies undermine a concept that was already weak in ability to account for agency in information seeking and use. This panel challenges that pronouncement by addressing how methodological approaches have created users in different manifestations -- emotional, cognitive, physical, and social -- elusive and capricious, dead or almost so, overly demanding, disinterested, individualistic, materialistic, culture-bound, active, passive.... Panelists zero in on how they have used and struggled with Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003) in attempts to conduct parsimonious, heuristic, and useful user studies and to introduce a strong user-orientation into LIS pedagogy and practice. Starting with the seminal Dervin & Nilan (1986) ARIST review of information seeking and use studies, Dervin's Sense-Making has been pointed to as sparking the turn toward user-oriented studies of information seeking and use (e.g., Savolainen, 1993). Sense-Making has been much quoted and misquoted, praised and criticized, implemented and co-opted. This panel will look backwards and forward using Sense-Making as an exemplar and foil for considering the ways philosophies that drive methodologies and methods that implement them enlarge or diminish our conceptions of the user.

A beast with many arms: How and why Sense-Making Methodology grew and mutated
Brenda Dervin

What is now known as Sense-Making Methodology appeared in emergent forms in the early 1970s and was named as such in the 1980s. This presentation will review the approach's history and impetus and the ways in which its twists and turns have attempted to struggle as a "methodology between the cracks" with this or that latest polarization of conceptions of the user. Myths about users are legion, e.g: users are dead; they are very much alive and want everything; they don't know what they want; most of them don't want us. Primary emphasis in this presentation will be placed on how being explicitly methodological in our orientation toward users is not intended to solve the problem of how to study users but rather is intended to assist researchers and practitioners in formulating approaches that advance our understandings and help us avoid the creating of mythic users who do not exist, creating instead, as if seen through tiny keyholes, useful pictures of "real" users with whom information systems can more meaningfully intersect.

When the user isn't really the user, nobody is yet using, and uses are multifold

Karen E. Fisher

Joan C. Durrance

In our ongoing quest to understand information and everyday life (IBEC, 2005), we employed Sense-Making in several studies as a general orienting and methodological framework. We will discuss how our study of people's use of online community networks (Fisher, Durrance & Unruh, 2002) led to our identification of **proxy seekers**, i.e., people who seek information on behalf of others without necessarily being asked or engaging in follow-up. Sense-Making also facilitated our formulation of enabling characteristics: the micro-moment timeline, which we instigated in an online survey as well as face-to-face interviews and focus groups, led us beyond the topics or reasons that our participants were online to uncover the actions that they were trying to accomplish. Different from gap-facing or gap-bridging, which focuses on how people meet information needs but yet similar in that they are also examples of Sense-Making's verbings, **enabling characteristics** are identifiable before information-seeking begins, are context-bound in people's situations and thus are indicative of the actions that they wish to undertake such as "connect with another person" or be "directed to a location." Thirdly, we'll share how we unfolded the Sense-Making concept of **uses** to reveal a rich array of direct and indirect outcomes of information seeking that were attributable to varied analytical units: individuals, families, neighborhoods and communities. Consistent with our panel theme of "looking forward" we'll address how Sense-Making's primary focus on individuals might be expanded for facilitating the study of multiple communicants and, in Dervin's words, "information as a property of conversation."

Users as sense-makers: What are the entailments of taking this methodological approach to studying/helping users?

Catherine Ross

The Dervin & Nilan (1986) ARIST review of information seeking and use studies was a wake-up call for researchers in what used to be called the Information Needs and Uses field. In this presentation, I address the methodological entailments of the Sense-Making approach by drawing on two areas in which I have been engaged: one research-related and one related to practice and pedagogy. In research, I have used Sense-Making as a framework for two long standing research projects: the Library Visit Study and a study of avid readers who read for pleasure. In teaching reference to would-be library practitioners and in providing training workshops to library staff, I have used the Sense-Making triangle of situations/ gaps/ uses. The question arises: what difference does it make, on the ground, when you work from this

conception of users? How does it affect the questions you ask and the kinds of data you count as evidence? How does it affect pedagogy and training for reference service?

Facing and Bridging Gaps: Approaching Information Seeking and Use from the Perspective of Sense-Making

Reijo Savolainen

Sense-Making Methodology provides a generalized approach to study human communication, including information seeking and use. Based on experiences received from two studies, the applicability of Sense-Making Methodology to specific questions of information seeking and use will be reviewed. First, a conceptual analysis concentrating on the issues of information use will be discussed. In this study, main attention was devoted to the ways in which information use and users may be conceptualized from the viewpoint of *gap-bridging* - one of the key categories of Sense-Making Methodology. Second, experiences received from an empirical study on Web searching will be discussed. In this study, the categories of *gap-facing* and *gap-bridging* were used to explore the discontinuities characteristic of Web searching and to approach Web searching as step-taking. In the light of the above studies, the potential and problems of the application of Sense-Making Methodology will be reviewed and their implications to the development of information seeking and use studies will be discussed.

Discovering Information Through Sense-Making (Theory and Method): Developing Theory and Methodology by Understanding Action

Paul Solomon

Perspectivity--theoretical, methodological, etc.--is a key element in 'taming the unruly beast.' Yet, while we may learn much from adopting one theoretical perspective or methodological approach, we lose what other perspectives might provide us. Dervin's Sense-Making has been a vehicle for both exploring perspectivity with regard to people and information and in understanding what information is to people engaged in life and work in contrast to what information is to information professionals. This leads to another turn on the term 'gap': the gap between what information is to people and what information systems provide. Sense-Making theory and its offshoots, adaptations (e.g., Solomon), and parallel approaches (e.g., Weick,) and Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin) and its adaptations, supplements, and complements are vehicles for exploring how people discover information in action. The outputs of research and the use of methods in the spirit of Dervin's Sense-Making end up being very particular as

they map situations, contexts, tasks, etc., and hopefully positively influence information transfer in those situations. The link from this understanding of action in context is key to the evolution of sense-making (broadly construed to include Dervin, Savolainen, Solomon, Weick, etc) and really all theory, method, and research related to people and information. Perhaps the idea of 'death of the user' is a 'throwing up of the hands' in that while we may realize that information is different things to different people for different situations, tasks and contexts, it is not easy to translate what we know about these differences to better these information use environments through design. An important challenge is to explore closing the research circle by both offering approaches for bettering information transfer (reducing 'the' gap?) and using the maps of sense-making (broadly construed) in context to identify patterns of similarity and difference that may be employed to further develop Sense-Making Theory (Dervin) as we consider the roles of various sense-making methods (broadly construed) in helping us both gain perspectivity and obtain the insights that we need to influence information system design.