



The public sphere and discursive activities: information literacy as sociopolitical skills

Public sphere
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activities

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Abstract

Purpose – To provide some theoretical considerations concerning information literacy so as to contribute to a theoretically informed point of departure for understanding information literacy and to argue that to be an information literate person is to have knowledge about information sources and that searching and using them is determined by an insight into how knowledge is socially organized in society.

Design/methodology/approach – Using concepts from composition studies that deal with the question of what a writer needs to know in order to produce a text, the paper outlines some ideas and key concepts in order to show how these ideas and concepts are useful to our understanding of information literacy. To demonstrate how information-literacy is to have knowledge about information sources and that searching and using them is determined by an insight into how knowledge is socially organized in society, the paper takes a point of departure in Habermas' theory of the public sphere.

Findings – Concludes that information seeking competence is a sociopolitical skill, like reading and writing skills, connected to human activity. Searching for documents in information systems is a complex and sociopolitical activity. As an expression of human activity we might say that searching for documents and reading and writing constitutes each other. The genre knowledge necessary in reading and writing does also apply when seeking information in systems of organized knowledge as the forms of information determine what can be expected and found in these systems. Information literacy covers, then, the ability to read society and its textually and genre-mediated structures. Information literacy represents an understanding of society and its textual mediation.

Research limitations/implications – Locating an understanding of information literacy in a broader discursive framework requires us to rethink our hitherto concepts and understandings of information literacy as socio-political skills and not mere technical search skills

Originality/value – Rarely is information literacy discussed and understood from social-theoretical perspectives. This article illuminates how an analysis of information literacy from the perspective of the theory of the public sphere can open up for an understanding of information literacy socio-political skills. Thus, the article has contributed with a new interpretation of information literacy.

Keywords Information literacy, Competences, Denmark

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The activity of information seeking may be considered trivial in the sense that it is something everyone masters. Or it may be considered a difficult activity worthy of



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serious investigation. Choosing the first implies that there is no justification for teaching and doing research in information seeking at, for instance, schools of library and information studies. Choosing the second point of view entails that theoretical and methodological issues need to be addressed in order to legitimize and argue for how to approach the problem of information seeking and to discuss what kind of knowledge, awareness, understanding, and skills are necessary to seek information.

A related area of research to information seeking is reading and writing research. Here reading and writing skills (i.e. literacy), or the degree of, are not considered trivial or uncomplicated. Rather, such skills are considered to be a fundamental part of one's ability to act socially in a literate world (Bazerman, 1994). Moreover, all of us who have been through school life will know that these skills are not something one just masters out of the blue, but something we acquire or not with varying degrees of success. Otherwise we did not have the need to go to school. Information seeking is also a literate activity on a par with reading and writing. Thus, an argument stating that information seeking is not an activity worthy of being taken seriously cannot be upheld. Because more and more people are in touch with systems of organized knowledge (as for instance intranets or the internet) in work as well as in everyday life, skills in finding, judging and sorting information are as crucial as reading and writing skills are in our society. This implies that information seeking expertise is not restricted to professional information seekers such as, for instance, librarians. Information seeking is a cultural technique like reading and writing, entailing that like skills in reading and writing are not innate, so it is with information seeking skills too.

The concept that covers skills in, the ability or competence in finding, evaluating, using and sorting out relevant information is usually called "information literacy". The concept has over time had varied names such as "bibliographic instruction" or "information competence". Bruce (2003) describes information literacy "... as the ability to access, evaluate and use information", and that it "... is based on the view that IL [information literacy] is an amalgam of skills, attitudes and knowledge ... " (Bruce, 2003, p. 261). What is interesting about Bruce's description of information literacy is that she not only refers to it in terms of skills but also in terms of attitudes and knowledge, suggesting that information literacy is a concept that also includes a (critical) stance towards information issues, that it is an activity, and that this activity is guided and motivated by knowledge; i.e. insights. "Information literacy" and related concepts has been thoroughly reviewed and discussed by Bawden (2001) and others (e.g. Bruce, 1997; Webber and Johnston, 2000; Virkus, 2003). Bawden suggested that:

To deal with the complexities of the current information environment, *a complex and broad form of literacy is required*. It must subsume all the skill-based literacies, but cannot be restricted to them, nor to any particular technology or set of technologies. *Understanding, meaning, and context must be central to it* (Bawden, 2001, p. 251; emphasis).

The prominence of understanding, meaning and context in information activities was shown by Sundin (2003) in his study of how Swedish nurses and their reading (i.e. information seeking) activities changed the more the professional domain of nurses advanced to being an academic study and relied on literature to communicate its professional knowledge. This demonstrates, moreover, that you cannot boil information literacy down to some standard or formal framework as does, for instance, ACRL (www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm). We cannot proceed and claiming to be devising information literacy frameworks

if we do not have adequate analytical understandings of information literacy. Analytical understandings provide the means to reflection and seeing and interpreting information literacy issues in light of cultural, historical, political and social perspectives. Standards as ARCL's Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (ALA, 2000) tend to make it look like, as it is the first time in the history of mankind that a need for a person to be information literate appears. They do not seem to pay attention to the fact that knowledge of information sources (whether people or documents) and their social organization has historically always been part of being a literate person, and many informational roles within the social organization of labour have been rooted in a designated individual (such as knowledge of the law). Furthermore, knowledge of literature (in the broad sense of the category) has historically also included knowledge of where this literature existed (cf. the notion of the men of letters (see Burke, 2000, p. 19)). Every society, every epoch in human history is characterized by what it considers as legitimate knowledge, itself a historical contingent category. Therefore, every epoch has its own view on what counts as legitimate information sources. Moreover, ARCL invokes information literacy in such a neutral language, thereby making it look like the old capitalist dream of as long as we do not interfere, the free market forces all citizens will prosper. In the same way with information literacy, it is considered a neutral ability to be learned and mastered by all citizens. But as shown by Besnier (1995) and Goody (1986) with regard to literacy, this is not a neutral skill, but a highly socio-political skill. Information literacy is no more than that. Becoming or being an information literate person is not a matter of following a standard or to be evaluated by one but to be able to discursively act upon a society configured and mediated by discourse.

In the following I will provide some theoretical considerations of such a complex and broad form of (information) literacy and point to how the issues of understanding, meaning, and context are critical in this respect in order to arrive at an informed point of departure for information literacy and information seeking. I try to locate information literacy in the context of what Warnick has called critical literacy, which covers:

... the ability to stand back from texts and view them critically as circulating within a larger social and textual context ... It includes the capacity to look beneath the surface of discourse, to understand implicit ideologies and agendas ... (Warnick, 2002, p. 6).

Information literacy must also, I believe, include "the capacity to look beneath the surface of discourse" as this is crucial in a world that is more and more mediated and shaped by many forms of information speaking on behalf of many interests that try to affect our daily lives.

I am going to approach my discussion in the following way. Having briefly described some literacy studies that connect literacy to forms of social organization, I then outline some ideas and key concepts from the field of composition studies in order to use them further on. Composition studies take point of departure in that to write is a difficult, but socially critical, technique to master and, consequently, the question of what you need to know in order to compose a text has a central role in this research field. Likewise, I focus on the question of what do you need to know in order to seek, read, use, and assess forms of information. I employ "information seeking" as the expression for the activity (either professional or everyday) that takes place when

searching for information in systems of organized knowledge (e.g. literatures, libraries, archives, the Internet, handbooks, encyclopedias, bibliographies, catalogs or discourse communities). It may be objected that everyday life information seeking cannot be included here. The point is, however, that even everyday information seeking is an activity that takes place within, and not outside, society's organized communication structures. But everyday information seeking may not imply the purposeful use of systems of organized knowledge. Emphasis here is not necessarily on communication to someone else but with illuminating the problem of how to act within a society structured by generic discursive activities, that is, with the problem of knowing where to go in order to search for information. Knowing where to go also applies for everyday life information seeking

Thus, information literacy covers in this respect what you need to know in order to be able to perform the activity of information seeking. Characterizing information seeking and systems of knowledge organization in this manner is, of course, rather derivative or secondary, as the social organization of labour in society must be considered as a primary system of organized knowledge. Documents stored in an electronic information system are produced by someone for somebody with a particular purpose in mind. That is, documents are the product of an already organized practice. However, since people use most documents deliberately, documents also shape the activities they are used within, making the relationship between how knowledge is organized socially and documents a dialectical one. This leads me to the third step as I intend to argue that knowledge about information sources and seeking and using them, is preconditioned by an understanding of how knowledge is socially organized in society. For this purpose I take point of departure in the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas and his theory on the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). This theory can be used to analyze how society is organized as an information sphere. Finally, I discuss and analyze information literacy in light the ideas and concepts from composition studies and the theory of the public sphere in an attempt to provide a social theory of information literacy.

Literacy and social organization

"Literacy" is generally used as the expression for the degree of reading and writing skills possessed by a person. However, such competences are not restricted to master grammar only. They also affect how society or a culture organizes itself. British anthropologist Jack Goody has in several works argued for how literacy impinges on social organization (Goody, 1977, 1986, 1987, 2000; Goody and Watt, 1963). In the book *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (1986), for instance, Goody describes how societies and their organization in the Near Orient and ancient Egypt changed with the introduction and use of writing in legal, political, religious, and trade activities. Likewise, Nico Besnier presents in the book *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll* (1995), an ethnographic study of how the introduction and use of writing on the Polynesian island of Nukulalae affected and altered the social organization of the island. This happened as a consequence of some people were fast at mastering reading and writing competences and using these in social activities such as, for instance, economic matters, administration or letter writing. Consequently, as not all people have the skills or the possibilities to possess such competences this entails a particular form of social organization: The division

between people possessing reading and writing skills and those who do not. Both Goody's and Besnier's studies point to that reading and writing skills are not only technical and neutral skills. But also sociopolitical skills connected to human activity. That way these skills are hooked up to the way people act in communication situations, that is, what people can do with language. Given that literacy and information literacy are related skills, we must understand and see information literacy in the same perspective as the latter is much more, as I argue later on and others with me have argued, than mere skills.

Information seeking seen as a human activity is of course not novel. Humans have for all times sought information in order to support their activities. The hunter in the Stone Age has, for instance, looked for appropriate places to hunt animals for the purpose of providing his settlement with food. However, one does not have to go back many years, when the activity of seeking information in databases and other kinds of information systems was almost restricted to spheres such as industry, research or the library world. With the extension and popularization of the Internet as a source of information, information seeking has become normal ingredient of the everyday activities of modern man. For instance, it is possible for us to find flight tickets, food recipes, read and listen to news, seek information about travel destinations, look for scholarly or professional documents etc. on the Internet. All this implies that because we are not necessarily dependent on professional information specialists and their assistance in information seeking activities anymore, a literate person in late modern society is not someone with reading and writing skills only. He/she must also be in possession of information seeking skills as late modern society and its information structures demand this.

Composition studies

In the following I will outline how the writing problem is viewed in composition studies. I do this in order to arrive at a point of departure for discussing and analyzing what one needs to know in order to seek information in systems of organized knowledge.

In the USA composition studies is a well-established area of research. The area has undergone different theoretical changes from formalistic studies through cognitive approaches to more sociohistorical and activity-theoretical approaches to writing (see, for example, Nystrand *et al.*, 1993; Weisser, 2002)

Writing research in this tradition focuses on what makes people (primarily college students) better at composing and writing texts. Therefore, the question of, and the answer to, what you need to know in order to write a text play a critical role. In 1982 Patricia Bizzell wrote an article in which she criticized the then dominating cognitive approach to writing. Instead, Bizzell argued for a more socially oriented approach taking its point of departure in the concept of "discourse community"[1]. With reference to help people in their writing activities, Bizzell argued that: "...we need to explain that their writing takes place within a community, and to explain what the community's conventions are" (Bizzell, 1982, p. 230). Thus, Bizzell points out that writing takes place within a community with certain historical and culturally developed conventions that shapes, and is shaped by, writing. This leads to another vital concept in composition studies coming from rhetoric: The rhetorical situation (for a discussion see Bitzer, 1968). This consists of the interaction between the elements

writer, purpose, audience, subject and context. Comprehending the rhetorical situation a writer is located in is of crucial importance. Lack of understanding of the rhetorical situation entails that one's writing does not reach the intended audience because the message did not have any effect on the audience. Consequently, for a writer to reach his audience it is not enough to have knowledge about the topic one is writing about. Knowledge about and understanding of how you communicate your message to the intended audience is also crucial. That is, how you communicate the message most appropriately with most effect. For this purpose one needs what Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) call genre knowledge; knowledge about how to communicate strategically within a discourse community. That is, what the norms are concerning vocabulary, writing style, epistemology, ideology, text composition etc., and what legitimize these norms.

In this way the concepts of discourse community, rhetorical situation and genre knowledge are bound together when writing a text. They make up the knowledge a writer needs to be in possession of in order to write appropriately to the intended audience. If these concepts are not taken into account one is not able to write a text that produce meaning to the audience. That is why it is so important when Bizzell argues that it is crucial to writers that they recognize that their writing activity takes place within a community with historically developed conventions for written communication. Later in the article I will analyze the concepts of discourse community, rhetorical situation and genre knowledge in connection with problem of information literacy.

Recently, a perspective has developed in composition studies that goes beyond academic writing. It seeks to situate the writing activity in a broader social theoretical outlook. Taking a point of departure in Habermas's theory of the public sphere, Weisser (2002) seeks to open for a more explicit understanding of writing as a sociopolitical activity, writers also are engaged in. In the next section I will briefly outline some relevant features of Habermas's theory of the public. My purpose with this is to argue and show how this may be interpreted as a theory that explains society as an information sphere. This theory exemplifies how information sources are organized in society. This implies that knowledge about information sources and seeking and using them is predetermined by an insight into how knowledge is socially organized in society.

The theory of the public sphere

German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas published in 1962 his influential work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. It was first translated into English in 1989 with the title *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

The theory of the public sphere is a social theory explaining how different kinds of communication genres develop and are being used in the social and ideological organization of various spheres and areas in society. Document genres and their functional role in society therefore determine how to search for them. That is, searching for document genres is to engage with particular forms of social organization.

The theory of public sphere is about the development of the modern (bourgeois) society into different spheres. It is a social theory stressing the role of various communication media in the organization and transformation of modern societies, in

the formation of public opinion and how it relates to the capitalist mode of production. Consequently, the theory of public sphere can also be looked upon as a theory of the social organization of documents and knowledge in society.

Habermas (1996), p. 27) writes about the bourgeois public sphere:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour.

What Habermas emphasizes about this notion of the public sphere is that it is made up of private people together forming a public and that these begin influencing political action. However, at the same time the theory is also a description of the rise and decline of the very same critical reasoning public and its public sphere. Therefore, the public sphere is to be considered historical category.

Habermas' description of the social organization of society into spheres is illustrated in Table I.

There is a strong vertical line between the civil society and the state. The civil society has developed in opposition to the state. About the private realm Habermas writes that it "... was the authentic 'public sphere', for it was a public sphere constituted by private people" (Habermas, 1996, p. 30). According to Habermas, therefore, in the private realm two kinds of spheres developed: the social sphere (realm of commodity exchange and social labour) in which the intimate sphere (conjugal family's internal space) was embedded. What is novel in Habermas' outline of society are not the people comprising it. Rather, Habermas' major argument is that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a public sphere, consisting of the political realm and the world of letters, developed in between the private realm and the sphere of public authority. That is to say, the public sphere developed as a kind of an intermediary sphere connecting the private realm and the sphere of public authority. The public sphere is the place where information from the social sphere, intimate sphere, and the public sphere in the political realm and in the public sphere in the world of letters becomes visible so to speak. Issues having their source in the social sphere are debated in the public sphere in the political realm, while issues having their source in the intimate sphere are debated in the public sphere in the world of letters. In this sense, the public sphere is viewed as an organizational principle of social and political order (Habermas, 1996, p. 4). However, the relationship between civil society, its spheres and the state is an expression of people's active production, distribution and consumption of documents in order to structure and elaborate a variety of

Private realm	Sphere of public authority	
Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labour) Conjugal family's internal space (bourgeois intellectuals)	Public sphere in the political realm Public sphere in the world of letters (clubs, press) market of culture products) "Town"	State (realm of the "police") Court (courtly-noble society)

Source: Habermas (1996, p. 30)

Table I.

communicative practices and activities. These again put limitations to what the contents of these very same documents can be. In this way the public sphere is not only an organization principle, but is also a decisive factor in terms of what can and cannot be communicated.

This public sphere is constituted by private persons and characterized by different means and modes of public communication, this in particular being the press, periodicals, literature, coffee houses, reading societies and the clubs. Accordingly, the public sphere materializes in the media and other genres of communication. This points to how the means and modes of communication organize the discursive activity taking.

As the theory of the public sphere is about the relationship between civil society and the state, it deals with how these two domains in society communicate with each other. The rise of the two conflicting spheres of society, the civil society and the state, created a communicative distance between. This promoted a need for mass communication. The public sphere formed a communicative space for debates over cultural, political and social issues. The press and the clubs serve as public spaces for the exchange of public opinion and critical discussion. They shape the kind of discussion going on and may as such be conceptualized as specific communicative genres developed to serve critical debate.

According to Habermas this is also a democratic problem. As for the press, for instance, it is also a commodity since it is owned by a capitalist enterprise and is in that way subjugated a capitalist mode of production. Due to its status as a commodity, the newspaper has its limitation in being vehicle for the free exchange of critical opinion and ideas. This limitation may impede a democratic dialogue between the involved discussants, which the ideal bourgeois public sphere presupposes. This conflict between spheres illuminates how the social organization of knowledge in society is linked to the organization of potentially conflicting interests.

The various spheres have different communicative interests and generate distinct ideas and conceptions and the communication of them happens through diverse document genres. The state passes law and produces legal documents, decrees and reports that set the agenda for citizens in order to act in accordance with the law. Documents in the public sphere of the political realm are typically newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets. They communicate and debate over political issues. Documents in the public sphere of the world of letters are the press, literature and periodicals communicating art, literary, and cultural topics. Communication in the social sphere is characterized by documents such as advertisements, trade journals and periodicals of societies signifying their relationship to commodity exchange and social labour. The private sphere has developed means of communication such as the diary and letters. What is crucial about this variety of document genres operating in society and state is that they organize the communicative activities of the various spheres or domains. The spheres generate documents in order to act within and in-between the particular spheres, and are thus forming a communicative action. Whatever sphere produces a document intended for wider public circulation, the reception and critical discussion of that particular document takes place in the public sphere, whether that is in the political realm or the world of letters.

As such, the theory of the public sphere provided by Habermas is about the relationship between society's socially organized communication structures and the

genres that have developed historically through these structures as responses to the communication interests of the various spheres and domains in society and state. In this way it depicts the sociopolitical organization of the producers, mediators, and users of information in society. That is, it describes the existence of various information systems found in society and their organization. Therefore, we may conceive of the theory as also being a theory of the social organization of knowledge and documents in society.

Information literacy: a social theory understanding

In what follows I examine how to view information literacy in light of the concepts from composition studies and the theory of the public sphere.

When seeking information in systems of organized knowledge users are in interaction with the documents stored in the systems. These documents are produced for many purposes, with many intentions and from a variety of perspectives and approaches. They are written as part of and as a product of human activity. From a rhetorical point of view, one may say that the documents stored in an information system are the outcome of an argumentation activity. Thus, information systems store arguments and using them in an information seeking activity is a search for and in arguments. Pawley (2003), in her critical article about the contradictions inherent the concept of information literacy, says about library catalogs that they:

... reduce all materials, no matter what the format or subject, to a standard set of descriptions, producing information that stands as a surrogate to the original but at the same time obscuring the individuality of the original ... These qualities of morselization and uniformity contribute to our impression of the informational genres [e.g. classification systems, catalogs, or indexes] *as standing alone, lacking history, authorship – lacking context of production* (Pawley, 2003, p. 432; emphasis).

This is the issue making information seeking a complicated activity, as the argumentative context documents are produced for and within, is both lost but to some extent mediated into the information system. The inescapable condition of informational genres like catalogs is that they are not standing alone; they are loaded with history, authorship and context of production. Why is this so? Because they are produced, distributed and used as part of human activity. Human activity understood as "... the societally-formed life process realized through the actions of the individuals participating in it" (Karpatschhof, 2000, p. 184) and is as such understood as a purposeful goal-oriented activity. Among other things, what characterizes human activity is that it intentional and produces and uses tools in order to achieve its objective. But the very human activity is historical contingent, implying that the reason why it looks like it does must be explained and understood with reference to what constitutes and motivates the activity. As this activity takes place in society with particular social structures and spheres each expressing an attitude toward society, knowledge of how to approach and use informational genres (i.e. the degree of information literacy) must include an consciousness of who produces these genres and for whom and with what intention because this determines how the informational genres works. Treating informational genres as mainly technical devices with no history, no context or no authorship stands in danger of removing attention away from technology as a human construction and from the kinds of labour put into informational genres (Warner, 2002). These kinds of labour determine how much

selection and search power a searcher is in possession of and they are the consequence of the presence and degrees of elements of syntactic labour (work performed by “humanly constructed technologies” (Warner, 2002, p. 13)) and semantic labour (human intellectual labour (Warner, 2002, p. 13)). Syntactic and semantic labour is the further product of the division of labour in capitalist production. Warner exemplifies with the *Financial Times*. As a web-resource with syntactically search facilities it is free of charge. The more the *Financial Times* is filled with semantic labour, that is, enhanced retrieval facilities, usage is not free anymore. Thus, Warner (2002), p. 14) argues, the “. . . readiness to pay for additional selection power . . .” corresponds to the kinds and degrees of labour one is interacting with. Concealing this human activity aspect of informational genres contributes to generate understandings of the information seeking activity, and hence the skills needed here, as ahistorical and isolated from any form of social organization that actually makes up the objective possibilities for information seeking (cf. Hjørland, 2000), and thereby trivializes information seeking both in its theory and practice.

Social organization matters as the way documents and knowledge is organized in society are a reproduction of the social and ideological organization of society. But it is not a passive reproduction. The organization of documents and knowledge in society also shape society’s social and ideological organization. The theory of the public sphere demonstrates this. It is because of the social and ideological organization, various discourse communities produce arguments in society, entailing the production of counterarguments. For example, if someone is looking for information on the topic “social class and the labour market”, then this topic is likely to be discussed and found in a variety of sources each belonging to a particular sphere and each expressed through a particular genre, thereby pointing to what *kind* of information on this topic there is to be expected, i.e. whether the information is issued from a public authority, is a newspaper article, is a document from a corporate firm or is a scholarly document. In short, how the topic is rhetorically shaped from a particular point of view in society. Information seeking in this respect is therefore involved in the discursive struggles taking place in society because of its social and ideological organization. This turns the information seeking activity into a sociopolitical activity as to search for information is to search in various spheres that are made up of a variety of historical origins, each giving birth to the way spheres are discursively constituted. Hence, information literacy covers the degree to which an information seeker is able to look through who produces and tries to naturalize and make transparent information and documents in society and for what purposes and with what means.

Another issue, following from the previous, that puts a certain demand on the information literate person is the bibliographic record or document representation. Users of information systems are still in many cases confronted with a sort of bibliographic record. It consists of various textual elements (e.g. author, title, subject, publisher[2]), each with a history, each performing a particular textual task, and each expressing something about and has a relation to the document they are representing and materializing (Andersen, 2002). In electronic retrieval these textual elements may all serve as potential subject access points (cf. Hjørland, 1997, 1998; Hjørland and Kylllesbech Nielsen, 2001). Thus, the user is confronted with many potential retrieval choices because of the various textual elements. This contributes to complicate information seeking insofar the user is not aware of when and which of these textual

elements are most appropriately employed because they serve different search functions and different ways of representing a document[3]. This leaves the user with problems of interpretation. It is not obvious how, why, and when the various textual elements relate to each other and other documents. What is needed is what I will call bibliographic genre and activity knowledge. Such knowledge would reflect knowledge of how the bibliographic record relates to other documents in the bibliographic universe; why the various textual elements are present at all and the activity they are part of and support. Thus, bibliographic genre and activity knowledge is not only knowledge about the single bibliographic record as a style and text, but is also knowledge about what the bibliographic record as text reflects, represents and accomplishes, that is as communicative interactions mediating between document, author, publisher, and user. The more one is acquainted with a given discourse community, the more one will be able to read and interpret the textual features of the bibliographic record.

Moreover, users interact with layers of organized knowledge as part of a broader division of labour. For instance, students going to write a term paper are dependent on a variety of information sources. Some of these are to be found in the bibliographical literature of the particular field. The journals included in bibliographies are but one expression of the social organization of knowledge within disciplines. Moreover, the journals themselves also represent a variety of theoretical or paradigmatic viewpoints; e.g. a journal entitled something like *Journal of Experimental ...* is expressing a preference for experimental studies, while a journal like *History of the Human Sciences* suggests an emphasis on historical studies and thus also other methods and theoretical approaches. Each of these journals contains a number of different articles with different emphasis, argumentation and problem. Thus, students performing literature searches in the bibliographical literature are interacting with a variety of literatures and arguments and with a variety of ways of organized knowledge, which they must have some (genre) knowledge of in order to conduct further their research for the term paper. They need to be in possession of a kind of information competence that covers concrete skills in search techniques and strategies and the dialectical relationship of these to the layers of organized knowledge in society in which the production and use of documents have a critical role to bear on these layer's social reality. Every system of organized knowledge, e.g. a database, is developed with regard to supporting and mediating the social practice (e.g. a library in an organization or a company) that effects the constitution of the database.

The significance of the contexts for search strategies, and their dependence of and to layers of organized knowledge, has also been suggested by Hjørland and Kylesbech Nielsen (2001), p. 286):

... the more we know about how authors use titles and terminology, how they compose their documents, how they cite other documents, and how they are affected by metatheoretical trends, as well as the more we know about the indexing and abstracting process, the more we know about objective search possibilities.

Here the dialectical relationship between search techniques and strategies and the socially organized production and use of documents and their conventions are pointed at. The objective search possibilities referred to are not only dependent on (if at all) the technical capacity of a given information system or an individual user. They are, rather, dependent on knowledge about title and terminology conventions, text

composition, citation behaviour, and metatheoretical trends. If an information seeker, for instance, is not aware of that within a particular domain there is a tendency to use rhetorical titles, as opposed to descriptive titles, knowledge about title conventions is decisive as to how to use title searches optimally. Here we are approaching the concepts of discourse community, rhetorical situation and genre knowledge. Similar to a writing activity that takes place within a discourse community, this also applies to information seekers. Their activity also takes places within a discourse community with particular historically, socially, and culturally developed conventions. The discourse communities and their conventions make up the frames for the objective search possibilities. In the very concrete situation one might therefore say that the information seeker is placed in a kind of rhetorical situation, as the information seeking activity must be considered part of a larger communicative activity. The information seeker finds himself in a sort of rhetorical situation as it is rather likely that what constitutes and motivates the information seeking activity is both a search for and production of argument. The information needed is going to be used in some sort of communicative activity and the determination of the information relevant to this activity is therefore also based on an argument. The information seeker is, we must assume, presented with an audience he is going to confront with the information gathered. Information also has a topic that needs to be shaped in accordance with *how* it is going to be used. Whether that information is going to be used in decision-making, “just” to inform, or to promote or affect some further state of affair, the information is used as argument. Thus, being in a sort of rhetorical situation, implies therefore that the information seeker, like “the informed writer” (cf. Bazerman, 1995), must be knowledgeable as to how to act within activities organized and formed around the production and use of documents. This underscores the connection between how knowledge is socially organized and how knowledge is organized in the information systems information seekers are in touch with. Pawley (2003) has also recognized the importance of such an understanding in connection with information literacy. She suggested to critically scrutinizing questions as:

Who produces what print and electronic publications, and for whom? Which institutions, corporations, and individuals are supporting publishing in terms of financial and political support? Who takes part in the process of information decontextualization, relocation, and recontextualization? (Pawley, 2003, p. 446).

Although not alluding to the theory of the public sphere, Pawley nevertheless draws attention to the importance of understanding, with respect to information literacy, that document production and use takes place within sociopolitical organized structures that determine in what ways documents can and cannot be sought. Lack of insight into this leaves little room for claiming the title of an information literate in late modern society. Therefore, Pawley also goes on to suggest that:

... information literacy courses should highlight, in addition to the tools and skills metaphor, the importance of learning about context and content in understanding how information “works” (Pawley, 2003, p. 448).

It is in this regard we may say that what one needs to know in order to search for information is conditioned by an insight into how documents and knowledge is socially organized in society. Habermas’s theory of the public sphere depicts how those documents existing in society are the product of the various spheres and their

communicative needs. Documents and their functions are to sustain, support, and organize social and political activities. They come into being exactly because of the need to express and manifest those activities. Thus, because of the social organization of society, there are a variety of sources of information *in* society, and information seeking is an activity that is performed according to how documents and knowledge is organized in society.

Concluding discussion

Like the solution to writing problems does not consist of having better pencils, typewriters, or word processors, but demands an understanding of the rhetorical situation the writer is located in; likewise it is with information seeking problems. The solution to these is not primarily databases with better user interfaces and the like. Information seeking skills are not solely a technical matter. Basically, information literacy must be grounded in an understanding of how the documents stored in the information system one uses are produced as a result of some generic communicative activities in society. Documents argue from a variety of perspectives for certain intentions, ideas, conceptions, or theories and produce arguments and knowledge claims on the basis of this and the documents' sociopolitical function in society (cf. Bazerman, 2000; Levy, 2001; Liu, 2004). Documents do this because that is what they historically have been developed for in order to support the activity they serve and from a social theoretical point of view this is what Habermas's theory of the public sphere shows.

Thus, the understanding of information literacy put forward in this article is much more than boiling information literacy skills down to standards, techniques or practical frameworks. I try to locate an understanding of information literacy within the context of society and its communication structures in order to elucidate how these are mediated and shaped by a variety of genres and what this imply for a person to be information literate. As much of our knowledge and information about a variety of political, historical, social and cultural events is received through the genres of the public sphere, we are heavily dependent on our grasp of how these genres work. Our degree of information literacy is, therefore, a function of what kinds of discursive activities we as humans are involved in. These activities are characterized by the production and use of a variety of text types, i.e. genres. But to recognize a particular text type is to recognize a particular communicative situation and activity in which that type of text (genre) is used to accomplish a given task. Bazerman (2000), p. 16) puts it this way:

Genres help us navigate the complex worlds of written communication and symbolic activity, because in recognizing a text type we recognize many things about the institutional and social setting, the activities being proposed, the roles available to writer and reader, the motives, ideas, ideology, and expected content of the document, and where this all might fit in our life.

As a result, in our everyday interaction with texts as producers and recipients, genres are means of orientation. Our knowledge of genres determines the means and modes of how we produce, use, understand, seek and evaluate texts and what we expect of them in professional as well as everyday life. Information literacy becomes equivalent to genre knowledge, as the more we know about the communicative activities we are involved in, the more we also know how to understand, evaluate, seek and use the texts

produced by these activities. Not knowing how the diversity of text types in society accomplishes their task on behalf of their producers and recipients entails that it is difficult to judge the usefulness and credibility of the text types. Moreover, depending on our genre knowledge, as genres reveal to us “the institutional and social setting, the activities being proposed, the roles available to writer and reader, the motives, ideas, ideology, and expected content of the document”, genres also organize knowledge and structure communication and are through this also contributing to how knowledge is socially organized in society.

Therefore, information seeking competence is a sociopolitical skill, like reading and writing skills, connected to human activity. Searching for documents in information systems is a complex and sociopolitical activity. As an expression of human activity we might say that searching for documents and reading and writing constitutes each other. The genre knowledge necessary in reading and writing does also apply when seeking for information in systems of organized knowledge as the forms of information determine what can be expected and found in these systems.

Information literacy covers, then, the ability to read society and its textually and genre-mediated structures. Information literacy represents an understanding of society and its textual mediation. We might go as far as to say that information literacy implies a critique of society insofar it includes a particular use and reading of particular information sources and use of particular forms of communication.

Notes

1. The appropriateness of this concept has been discussed in the literature of genre and composition studies (e.g. MacDonald, 1994; Prior, 1998; Swales, 1990, 1998).
2. In the literature this is sometimes referred to as bibliographic data or data elements; see, e.g. Hagler (1997)
3. This is more or less in accordance with what Hjørland (1997, 1998) calls “database semantics”.

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