

Exploring Context in Information Behavior

Seeker, Situation, Surroundings, and Shared Identities

Synthesis Lectures on Information Concepts, Retrieval, and Services

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Naresh Kumar Agarwal

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Naresh Kumar Agarwal

Simmons School of Library & Information Science

*SYNTHESIS LECTURES ON INFORMATION CONCEPTS, RETRIEVAL,
AND SERVICES #61*

ABSTRACT

The field of human information behavior runs the gamut of processes from the realization of a need or gap in understanding, to the search for information from one or more sources to fill that gap, to the use of that information to complete a task at hand or to satisfy a curiosity, as well as other behaviors such as avoiding information or finding information serendipitously. Designers of mechanisms, tools, and computer-based systems to facilitate this seeking and search process often lack a full knowledge of the context surrounding the search. This context may vary depending on the job or role of the person; individual characteristics such as personality, domain knowledge, age, gender, perception of self, etc.; the task at hand; the source and the channel and their degree of accessibility and usability; and the relationship that the seeker shares with the source. Yet researchers have yet to agree on what context really means. While there have been various research studies incorporating context, and biennial conferences on context in information behavior, there lacks a clear definition of what context is, what its boundaries are, and what elements and variables comprise context.

In this book, we look at the many definitions of and the theoretical and empirical studies on context, and I attempt to map the conceptual space of context in information behavior. I propose theoretical frameworks to map the boundaries, elements, and variables of context. I then discuss how to incorporate these frameworks and variables in the design of research studies on context. We then arrive at a unified definition of context. This book should provide designers of search systems a better understanding of context as they seek to meet the needs and demands of information seekers. It will be an important resource for researchers in Library and Information Science, especially doctoral students looking for one resource that covers an exhaustive range of the most current literature related to context, the best selection of classics, and a synthesis of these into theoretical frameworks and a unified definition. The book should help to move forward research in the field by clarifying the elements, variables, and views that are pertinent. In particular, the list of elements to be considered, and the variables associated with each element will be extremely useful to researchers wanting to include the influences of context in their studies.

KEYWORDS

information behavior, information seeking, context, situation, environment, task, user, source, contextual identity framework

To Sikkim—the land that nurtured me
My family and friends—you are my anchor
And to all those who paved the path for me to walk on

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Preface

When I was pursuing my Ph.D. in Information Systems at the National University of Singapore in 2008, I would have frequent meetings with my co-advisor Yunjie (Calvin) Xu. As we worked on designing a research framework for a survey study of knowledge workers in Singapore, he suggested it might be a good idea to review the literature on context. At the time, I didn't know what I was getting into.

When you ask a question to someone, and you don't get an easy "yes" or "no" answer, and the person says, "It depends," that is when you know that the person is talking about context. In my month-long investigation following the meeting with my co-advisor, I realized that understanding context was not very different from peeling onions. The more I thought I understood, the more I uncovered new layers that provided more questions than answers. Was context something which contains, i.e., the environment that surrounds a seeker of information? Was it the seeker as the person, or the information source that the person looked to for information? Was it the channel of communication that the seeker used to reach the source? Or was it the factors that impacted the choice of the source? Was it the task at hand, or simple everyday curiosity? Was it place and time? Was it situation? Or was it a shared identity or kinship with a team or group one was a part of? As Dervin (1997) wrote, "the very question [of what is context] turns out to be almost embarrassing, and certainly a question leading to a quest that demands extraordinary tolerance of chaos" (p.13).

It took me many months to wrap my head around what context in information behavior might mean. Context has been an important part of the empirical and theoretical studies that I have conducted in the years since then. Whether I am looking at medical residents in a hospital, the interactions of a child with an iPad, the information-seeking behavior of students, the information practices of faculty members, or theoretical and conceptual studies synthesizing different phenomena, an understanding of context plays an important role in the design of those studies.

I developed theoretical frameworks to understand the different aspects of context, what its boundaries and elements are, and how context can be applied in the design of research studies. This book is an endeavor to synthesize and conceptualize the research and understandings of context in the information behavior literature so far, and my own prior research, and to arrive at a definition of context in information behavior. The proposed frameworks should help future researchers as well as search system designers. Now that I've shared with you my context for writing this book, we are ready, quoting Dervin (1997), "to demonstrate extraordinary tolerance for chaos, and to talk about context!" ☺

Naresh Agarwal

Acknowledgments

As I seek to thank people who were by my side as I wrote this book, I think it might be useful to situate these within the contextual factors of task or situation, the surroundings or environment, the information need, the actor or seeker, the source or system, the actor-source relationship, and time/space.

The task or situation was that I was applying for a 6-month sabbatical from the Simmons School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) (the *environment*). The *need* then was a worthy project to work on during the sabbatical. I am thankful to Professor Gary Marchionini and the reviewers for approving my proposal. My heartfelt thanks to my wonderful Dean Eileen Abels, the review committee and the Provost for approving my sabbatical, which enabled me to work on this project. I'm grateful for the support of all my colleagues at SLIS.

I was the *actor* or *seeker* in need of information through the process of synthesizing and writing. The various information *sources* were the proceedings of the information seeking in context conferences, information behavior books, and primarily, my own prior research on context since my Ph.D. days at the National University of Singapore. I'm grateful to my graduate student assistant, Alison Fisher, who worked closely with me in helping gather literature, making suggestions and meeting with me online as I worked on the book. My familiarity with the sources and the literature (*actor-source relationship*) was very useful in putting the book together.

The *time* was the November 2016–August 2017 period when I worked on the book, as well as later period of reviews and revisions (September–October, 2017) until publication. I'm grateful to Diane Cerra for being so supportive throughout and helping secure the approval for letting me design my own self-painted cover. My sincere thanks to the reviewers Professors Sanda Erdelez and Barbara Wildemuth for their very thorough review and comments. I believe that addressing all their comments greatly helped to improve the book. The *place* where I worked was my home office in Sharon, Massachusetts, typing away on my Windows laptop. I'm eternally grateful for the unconditional love and support of my wife Dr. Archana Agarwal and the joy of my two kids—9-year old Eesha and 2 ½-year old Ishaan.

I'm thankful to my family in India who have been with me throughout. Last, but not the least, I'm indebted to my friends ('sāthi' in Nepali or Hindi, or "priya snehitah" or "mitram" in Sanskrit), who have always been there for me—whether in person, over the phone, or through social media.

Naresh Agarwal

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