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Article:

Cox, A.M., Griffin, B. and Hartel, J. (2018) Introduction. *Library Trends*, 66 (3). pp. 219-222. ISSN 0024-2594

<https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2018.0000>

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Introduction to special double issue: Information and the body

Andrew Cox, Brian Griffin and Jenna Hartel

Within Library and Information Studies (LIS), the study of information behavior¹ has traditionally focused on documentary sources of information and to some degree information that is shared through interaction. Such an emphasis reflects the origins of the whole field in the study of the information behavior of users of libraries and other institutions that provide access to encoded forms of knowledge. Yet the centrality of *embodied* experience in all aspects of human life makes the relative neglect of the body in information behavior studies surprising and potentially problematic, as a number of authors have suggested (Cox, Griffin and Hartel 2017; Lueg 2014, 2015; Lloyd 2009,2010,2014; Olsson, 2010, 2016). This special double issue of *Library Trends* on “Information and the Body” brings together researchers interested in embodied information, including in how we receive information through the senses, what the body “knows” and the way the body is a sign that can be interpreted by others.

Several intersecting research developments suggest a need for greater attention to embodied information. There are early hints at the importance of this theme in a number of information behavior studies, for example Bates (2006), Prigoda & McKenzie (2007), and Hartel (2007). An increasing focus on information practices in the field offers a useful starting point for more fully theorizing the relationship between information and the body (Lloyd 2008). There is a growing interest in phenomenological studies of information, which would also be likely to elaborate our understanding of the role of the body in information behavior. Other perspectives are important too: For example, Lueg (2014; 2015) has drawn on notions of embodied cognition in his work on the role of the body in information behavior. The growing interest in materiality and the senses in studies of museums and archives, and also in the changing nature of reading and the internet to include multisensory experiences are also relevant. While emerging from different philosophical roots, these strands of thought seem to be coming together as an important new direction in information research, towards information and the body. In many other disciplines, such as anthropology, education, communication, history, geography and sociology, the body and materiality have been of central interest for several decades, and this should motivate information researchers to catch up.

The need to recognise the importance of the body in information behavior scholarship may also be prompted further by developments at the level of professional practice. Heightened interest in the library world in the importance of physical space and its design also implies a concern with the body and the material world. Haptic interfaces that allow the user to interact with a computer in rich sensory ways or self-tracking of bodily functions using apps and wearable devices, are just two of many trends that signal the end of the myth of disembodied virtuality. Interest in information phenomena within contexts that are centered on the body, such as medicine, sport, music and cooking likewise demand new approaches – and it has already been shown to be relevant in everyday workplace contexts.

¹ For simplicity we continue to use this phrase as the umbrella term, though we recognise the debate surrounding the terms information behaviour, information practice, information experience, information activity, etc.

As other disciplines have begun to engage with bodily experience a corresponding methodological debate has also occurred (Pink 2015). This typically points to the value of ethnographic and auto-ethnographic work, as well as arts-based, visual, multimodal, and other sensory methods. Relatively few connections have been made to date between work in information behavior to these wider methodological developments.

The collection of papers in these special issues of *Library Trends* offer a rich sense of how this area of study is developing in LIS, drawing on diverse influences and methodologies. The strength of the response to our call for papers, reflects the breadth of interest in this emergent field and determined the decision to produce a double issue. Given this diversity, each author has been asked to establish for the reader their interpretation of embodied information within their metatheoretical commitments. In addition, some broader context is offered in the paper by Cox. Yet reflecting different traditions, basic terminology in use itself varies. Blackler (1995) is often cited by scholars working in the area of Knowledge Management for differentiating *embodied knowledge* as one form of knowledge alongside others. *Tacit knowledge* is often seen as partly or wholly residing in the body. Orr (1996) in his classic workplace ethnography saw practical knowledge used in repairing photocopiers as *kinaesthetic* knowledge. A number of practice orientated writers have written about *sensory, sensual or sensible* knowledge. Those influenced by phenomenology use terms like *corporeal or fleshly knowledge* (e.g. O'Loughlin, 2006). Thus the reader should be alert to subtle different uses of terminology, reflecting different theoretical assumptions. As editors we have not attempted to impose any unified terminology, rather tried to ensure each author establishes their position clearly.

The collection can be read in a number of ways. It may be instructive to follow particular theoretical influences, such as phenomenology, practice theory, embodied cognition or critical theory. The collection can also be interrogated from a methodological perspective, with several papers emphasising novel data collection methods. As the collection reaches across a wide range of settings from health to everyday and leisure contexts such as shopping or ultra-running, the reader could also focus on particular contexts. As editors, we hope it is the collection as a whole that will engage you, and excite you to contribute to the growing community of scholars who are currently working in this area.

Notwithstanding the apparent interest in the body and information, there will be a concern that it tempts scholars in LIS away from our traditional focus in documentary information. Hartel's paper in the collection articulates such doubts and reminds us of the many unanswered questions that reside within the traditional topical boundaries of our field. The collection closes with a view from beyond LIS, from the distinguished commentator, Steve Fuller.

As editors we would like to thank the authors, reviewers (listed below) and the editor and staff of *Library Trends* for their support in the project. We hope and believe the collection will be a landmark in the development of this area of scholarship within LIS.

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Dr. Jenna Hartel is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. Her work aims to be an imaginative, energetic, and committed form of intervention in the field of library and information science (LIS). She believes a different character of LIS is possible, one that moves beyond pragmatic concerns with information resources and technologies to consider positive and upbeat information phenomena across the entire human experience. Dr. Hartel has committed herself to promoting that vision through research into information within leisure, pleasurable, and profound contexts. To the same end, her ideas are expressed and packaged in non-standard forms of presentation that are playful and accessible to all. She hopes to be a catalyst, endeavoring to inspire and encourage the field of LIS to explore new areas, import new methods, break out of traditional boxes in which it conducts its research, and entertain new possibilities.