
A Social Constructionist Approach to the Study of Information Use as Discursive Action

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INTRODUCTION

In information studies, the number of studies directly focusing on information use has so far remained rather low. Analyses of the actual use of information have been overshadowed by surveys that reduce the issues of information use to such questions as how often different information sources and channels have been consulted within a certain period of time. These studies may yield useful results, for example, for libraries planning to reorganise their services. However, it is obvious that these surveys no longer offer really new insights to the study of information seeking and use (Savolainen 1994). More advanced analyses of information use have been offered by Robert S. Taylor (1991) and Brenda Dervin (1992). We find the basic idea of Dervin's sense-making theory particularly relevant, because she points out that it is possible to study information use as constructive action.

We think that the central task of information seeking research is to enhance the understanding of the role of information in people's everyday lives. In this paper we offer a social constructionist theory as a fruitful approach to studying information use as discursive action. The essential idea of social constructionism is stated by Rom Harré (1983, 58) as "the primary human reality is persons in conversation". The importance of communication and conversation in structuring and organizing social reality is also emphasized by other researchers (see, for example, Bruner 1990; Dervin 1993; Edwards & Potter 1992; Sampson 1993; Shotter 1993a). The idea we are putting forward is that it is possible to focus on analysing conversations (seen broadly as all kinds of spoken and written communication) when studying information use. This means that the research approach we are presenting in the paper focuses on public and social, not on the private and subjective information use. When studying the latter kind of information use, other methodologies and research approaches are called for.

In short, we understand information use as an activity that can, analytically, be divided into two phases: 1) construction of information and 2) using or

utilizing the constructed information in action. Our research approach focuses on the discursive constructions of previously received or sought information and on how those constructions are put to use in talk or writing. Information use is seen as constructive and functional in the sense that it is oriented to action. In the context of our paper, we define discourse broadly as "all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds" (Potter & Wetherell 1987, 7).

Our paper is structured as follows. Having introduced social constructionism we present a social constructionist critique of the previous research approaches to studying information use. This critique is followed by a general review of the nature of discursive action and its analysis. Then we focus on the principal issue of our paper: information use as discursive action. Finally, we make comparing notions to related approaches to studying information behaviour.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM - A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The social constructionist¹ perspective does not view language as an abstract system disconnected from concrete talk and writing. The focus is on "words in their speaking" rather than on "the structures of already spoken words" (Shotter 1993a, 20). The basic idea of social constructionism is thus the constructive nature of language use. When we talk and write, we produce and organize our social reality. Hence, language is neither conceived as a window through which the world shows itself nor as a mirror directly reflecting our observations.

Because social constructionism emphasizes the processual negotiation of meanings, primary attention is paid to the reality construction through discourse. This means that social constructionists understand language and knowledge formation in an anti-realistic way. Events and states of things may be described in various ways, and many sometimes even inconsistent versions of them can be produced. This conception makes problematic the claims sometimes made by professional elites that they have privileged access to the only real or true version of reality (Gergen & Semin 1990, 14–16). Irrespective of whether a certain description is presented in everyday talk or in a scientific arena, it is always and necessarily constructive. Although some versions of reality may be infinitely preferable to others, and should be argued for and pushed forward whenever possible, there is no versionless reality. (Wetherell & Potter 1992, 62)

Social constructionism is also characterised by the rejection of monologism. According to Sampson (1993), monologism refers to a historically developed and still dominant way of thinking which takes the individual human being as its point of departure. In social constructionism, individualistic monologism is replaced by dialogism. Seen from the dialogic perspective, the most important things take place in interaction, in discursive and bodily practices between human beings, not within the individual which is cut off from his or her social

relationships. Thus, in social constructionism the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum" is replaced by "communicamus ergo sum" (Gergen 1994, viii). Social constructionists assume that we construct versions of reality between ourselves and that knowledge is something people do together rather than an individual possession.

PROBLEMS IN STUDYING INFORMATION USE

As Frohmann (1992), Green (1991) and Miksa (1992), among others, emphasize, the prevailing theoretical approaches in information studies have fairly strong ties with the Shannonian metaphor of information transfer. This metaphor is characterized by the assumption of objective information which carries (by means of language (a constant meaning from a source through a channel to a receiver. From this perspective, language is seen to function like a conduit transferring thoughts bodily from one person to another (cf. Reddy 1979, 286–292).

Although the metaphor of information transfer is very popular, it has also encountered increasing criticism. For example, Dervin (1991) has pointed out that there cannot exist any information unless a human subject (or human subjects together) constructively make sense of the received messages. She ironizes the transfer metaphor by drawing a parallel between information to be transferred and a brick that moves from a sender through a communication channel to a receiver (that is, according to this metaphor, seen as an empty bucket). This analogy suggests that the transfer metaphor does not leave much room for the active interpretation and construction of meaning. Although the transfer metaphor may be useful in the study of specific questions of information retrieval, the analysis of information use as constructive action requires alternative viewpoints.

Another very popular research approach in our field is the cognitive viewpoint. This viewpoint is characterized by the assumption of conceptual structures, categories or mental models located in the individual mind. All information that is sought or received is "filtered" through these models which for their part are subject to change due to incoming information. This change of cognitive models is seen to be an integral part of information use (cf. Cole 1994). More or less explicitly, the cognitive viewpoint is grounded on the analogy according to which the mind processes information, classifying it into various categories like a computer which functions by means of programmes (Ellis 1990, 53). This analogy has been criticised by Jerome Bruner (1990), one of the pioneers of the Cognitive Revolution. He points out that cognitive science employing the computer analogy has gravitated towards technical and culturally insignificant questions. In fact, the computer analogy does not enable the analysis of social and cultural construction of meanings².

The main difficulty in applying the cognitive viewpoint to the analysis of information use concerns the way this approach conceptualizes the relationship between discourse and cognition. Many proponents of the cognitive viewpoint believe that conceptual changes taking place during the reception of information can be measured by scrutinizing the "linguistic manifestations" caused by these changes (Ingwersen 1992, 35; cf. Froelich 1994, 126; Sutton 1994, 187). They are naturally not alone in assuming that discourse functions like a window through which one can observe the "internal states" of the speaker or writer. However, as social constructionists point out, "there is little to warrant the traditional claim that specimens of language furnish accurate or transparent indications of the internal world" (Gergen & Semin 1990, 9).

In contrast to the cognitivist assumption of the relationship between discourse and cognition, social constructionists understand discourse as constructive in itself. Rather than seeing discursive constructions as expressions of the speakers underlying cognitive states, the analysis concentrates on the situated and occasioned nature of talk. Discursive constructions make sense, to analysts and conversation participants alike, in terms of the social action they are constructed to accomplish (Edwards & Potter 1992, 2-3).

Such a view of the relationship between discourse and cognition can also be found in the philosophy of later Wittgenstein (1953). He is very sceptical of the one-to-one correspondence between words and reality and emphasizes instead that words get their meaning in their socially determined context of use by occupying a certain role within a language game. If language games and the life forms in which they are embedded are primary in understanding discursive practices, it is highly problematical to assume that discourse could be seen as a pathway or window through which we can examine the workings of the speaker's underlying cognitive machinery. Adopting this kind of Wittgensteinian view, social constructionists have moved on to the investigation of the textual and spoken references to mind and mental states as means for discursive action (Shotter 1993a, 28-29, 181-182).

The emphasis on the constructive nature of language use is also associated with the fact that in recent years, several research areas within psychology and social psychology have been reconceptualized from the viewpoint of social constructionism and discourse analysis. For instance, traditional approaches to studying attitudes (Potter & Wetherell 1987), remembering (Edwards & Potter 1995; Middleton & Edwards 1990; Wooffit 1992), categorization (Billig 1987; Edwards 1991), attribution (Edwards & Potter 1992; 1993), script knowledge (Edwards 1994) and mind in general (Harré & Gillett 1994; Harré & Stearns 1995) have been subjected to critical review and reconceptualization. The major idea of this reconceptualization is that once one realizes that language use is itself a form of social activity, it becomes untenable to treat accounts as transparent indicators of inner mental events. However, this realization does not

mean that discourse researchers should abandon the study of people's mental lives. Social constructionists assume that it is possible to study people's thoughts, ideas and emotions by looking at how they are played out in action (Potter & Wetherell 1995, 82-83). In discursive psychology, attitudes are not seen as permanent cognitive states, but as variable discursive constructions and conversational remembering is examined as a discursive practice, not as a mechanical recall of information previously stored in the mind³.

When adopting the viewpoint of social constructionism to the analysis of information use, one is not studying internal and subjective but discursive constructions of information. By adopting a social constructionist approach we can agree with Taylor's (1993, 92) statement that "information is a property of conversation" and Dervin's (1991, 45) "information as a thing must be reconceptualized in communication terms".

THE NATURE AND ANALYSIS OF DISCURSIVE ACTION

The methodology suitable for studying discursive action is discourse analysis. This methodology is based on the theoretical ideas of discursive social constructionism, but social constructionists can, of course, use other kinds of research approaches as well. There are also many kinds of discourse analytic approaches not always in harmony with one other. We base our approach largely on the discourse analytical ideas developed by the British social psychologists Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (Edwards & Potter 1992; Potter & Wetherell 1987, 1994, 1995). This methodological framework stresses the constructive, functional and variable nature of talk and writing. It is concerned with what people do with their talk and writing and also with different sorts of cultural resources that people draw on in the course of the discursive practices they are engaged in (Potter & Wetherell 1995, 81).

In discourse analysis, language is seen primarily as a tool or medium orientated to contextually relevant discursive action (Edwards 1991, 518; cf. Austin 1962; Mills 1940). In the course of our discursive practices we produce assertions, make accusations as well as mitigate blames, call previously stated things into question, refuse to accept invitations, explain and justify our motives and ways of behaviour, make excuses and so on. Concern with the constructive and action-oriented nature of discourse also means that reporting or descriptive talk is not seen as neutral or objective. Giving a certain description of events or state of things serves the needs of rhetorical and pragmatic social action (Edwards 1994, 214; Heritage 1984, 140-150). Thus, the nature of description will vary according to the discursive action that is performed with it in a certain context (Edwards 1994, 217).

Discourse analysis is concerned with methods of description: how versions become established as solid, real and independent of the speaker or writer. An equally important concern is to investigate the different activities that can be

done with factual discourse. (Potter, Edwards & Wetherell 1993, 386–387). The main point in producing factual, believable or at least rhetorically sustainable descriptions is that the version being produced in talk or text should appear as if it came from outside the speaker in order to show itself as a fact, a realistic description which has not been biased by the interests or desires of the producer of the account (Edwards & Potter 1992, 65; cf. Smith 1978). This is due to the culturally developed conception according to which a speaker or writer pursuing his or her interests modifies facts in order to support his or her view (Edwards & Potter 1992, 158). If we are not able to produce ourselves as credible describers of reality, the rhetorical effectiveness of our reports will decrease remarkably (Gergen 1994, 165–182). Thus, it is important to create the impression of “out-thereeness” or disinterestedness of a version we are constructing. If one succeeds in this, it is often possible to perform difficult discursive action with the version made to seem factual. In a controversial or disputable situation, for example, it is important to make a version or an argument seem like “that’s not just what I think, that’s the way it is”:

Put simply, when there is nothing to argue about there is no need to formulate the facts. Far from factual reporting being a contrast to rhetoric, it is a feature of rhetoric. (Edwards & Potter 1992, 125)

It is not unusual that participants in a conversation representing, for example, different organisations or interest groups make attempts to undermine the competing versions and try to construct their own version as “the only real way to see things”. Undermining of the competing version is very often accomplished by claiming that this version does not describe the world realistically but it is coloured by the stake or interest of the speaker or writer (Potter & Edwards 1990, 416; cf. Gilbert & Mulkay 1984). Thus, using different discursive resources the participants can try to prevent the possible refuting of their own version and to disprove or undermine the competing ones (Edwards, Potter & Wetherell 1993, 394; Wooffit 1992, 69–70). Often the conflicts and tensions in a discourse can remain more latent or implicit. An event description or an argument may be constructed to rhetorically undermine or rebut some other socially strong version or argument that has not been made explicit during a conversation (cf. Billig 1987). This means that factual versions are often constructed against some absent Other (Wetherell & Potter 1992, 96).

Factual or reporting discourse is also closely connected with the accountability of action and the interactional consequences of descriptions. In order to meet the demands placed upon us as responsible members of our society we must talk in certain already established ways to account for ourselves and to others around us (cf. Shotter 1989, 140–141). Thus, the accountability of action is embedded in the social order and based on moral requirements. The presen-

tation of accounts concerning our action often involves justifications or explanations that try to make our ways of behaving and talking more understandable and acceptable. Hence, making one’s actions and claims accountable can be viewed as constructing them in ways that make them hard to rebut or undermine and which make them seem fair or objective (Edwards 1991, 523; Potter & Wetherell 1994, 60). In ethnomethodology, concern with accountability is seen as an essential character of human conduct (Heritage 1984).

It is important to point out that in discourse analysis the researcher does not speculate with the speaker’s or writer’s individual motivations or speech acts. In most cases, people will not strategically plan their discourse in a Machiavelian fashion but they just do “what comes naturally” or state what “seems right” for the situation (McKinlay, Potter & Wetherell 1993, 145; Wooffit 1992, 2). Furthermore, one speaker or writer does not alone determine the active and unfolding nature of conversation. He or she is not an isolated actor totally controlling his or her acts or words but a participant in a joint action (Shotter 1993a, 39–40; Shotter 1993b, 4–5, 46–48). Because discursive action is joint action by nature, the researcher focuses on the organization of discourse: on what happens “in-between”, not “inside” the speakers (Edwards & Potter 1995, 20; Potter, Edwards & Wetherell 1993, 391).

INFORMATION USE AS DISCURSIVE ACTION

How then is it possible to study information use as discursive action? In order to answer this question we start with a short extract from a conversation taking place in a family:

- So: That’s John. He cut his hair by the way.
 Mo: Oh he did?
 So: Yeh.
 Mo: Do you like it?
 So: Uh, Yeah, [(He looks) –
 → Mo: [I heard– uh, I read two or three columns and I
 → hear it over TV that it’s become old– it’s becoming passé.
 (2.9)
 Fa: They what?
 (1.5)
 Mo: The longer hair.

Extract 1. (Source: Pomerantz 1984, 622)⁴

In Extract 1 we find particularly interesting the comment about long hair made by the mother. She refers to specific magazine or newspaper columns and a television programme in order to produce a factual version suggesting that long hair is out of fashion. By referring to external information sources she does

not explicitly reveal her own opinions but only makes a version that appears credible. This reference is in this context a discursive action in which the mother suggests indirectly that the son would benefit from having his own long hair cut (Pomerantz 1984, 621–623). In the conversation extract, however, the long hair of the son is not directly talked about because this issue seems to be a delicate one in the family.

By utilizing the idea developed by Erving Goffman (1981) we may say that the mother shifts her footing in producing the utterance we are concerned about. The notion of footing was used by Goffman to characterize different conversational practices such as that one where the mother is reporting the views presented in the media. According to Goffman, a speaker can employ different “production formats”, for example, he or she may act as an animator or author of his or her own words⁵. The animator is the person who presently utters a sequence of words. The one who originated the beliefs and the sentiments, and perhaps also composed the words through which they are expressed is the author. In producing her utterance the mother acts as an animator but not as an author of her own words. In this case, the author is not directly a human being, but the identity of the author of the utterance is conferred on the specific products (columns, a television programme) of human activity.

The discourse analytic study of information use is not focused on any kind of constructive processes taking place in conversations but expressly on those situations where the discourse user shifts footing by producing him- or herself as an animator, thereby giving the position of the author of his or her words to somebody or something else. The author of an utterance may be, for example, another person, a book or an X-ray picture. However, when studying information use, we are not interested in, for example, imaginary authors (the speaker may also shift his or her footing by imagining what someone else would say in a certain situation). The author or authors should play the role of an information source, as in Extract 1 in which the mother states explicitly that there are real external sources on which she bases the views presented in her talk. Thus, the discursive action we are interested in in our analysis should have connections with an earlier situation in which some kind of seeking or reception of information has taken place. What “really” happened in such a situation is not, however, at the focus of the study, because when doing discourse analysis one should fully concentrate on the communicative situation subject to one’s analytical observation.

Let us take the comment made by the mother (“I heard—uh, I read two or three columns and I hear it over TV that it’s become old— it’s becoming passé”) for a closer scrutiny. Her utterance can, for analytical purposes, be divided into two parts. At the beginning of the utterance she shifts footing by showing that she is basing her claim on the information she has received from the media. Having produced the footing shift, she starts to construct the information in a way that

serves the discursive action she is performing (indirectly suggesting to the son that he should have his long hair cut). We can see from the utterance that when studying information use as discursive action the two phases of information use mentioned in Chapter 1 (construction of information and putting it to use) are often almost inseparably linked with each other.

The major aim of the discursive study of information use is to investigate how information that is received or sought from some other source than the speaker’s or writer’s direct experience is discursively constructed or designed for accomplishing pragmatic social action. This methodological perspective directs our attention to contextual variations of constructing information in talk and writing. For example, patient A may construct differently what doctor Y has said to him about the curability of his disease depending on to whom he is speaking and in what kind of conversational context he is shifting footing and producing a version of Y’s diagnosis. In discourse analysis it is highly problematic to try to find one right version of this diagnosis. The main assumption of discourse analysis is that versions produced about the diagnosis will vary according to the discursive actions being performed by them in different contexts. Thus, A constructs the received information actively in doing different kinds of pragmatic social work. The mother in Extract 1 is also constructing a version of information she has received in a contextually relevant way.

We do not see information as an entity with fixed boundaries or as a commodity that is transferred through communication channels. Rather, information is a communicative construct which is produced in a social context. The contextual nature of discursive action can be approached at least from two viewpoints. Firstly, utterances (discursive actions) are doubly contextual in being both context shaped and context renewing (Heritage 1984, 242). This means that an utterance cannot be adequately understood except by reference to the interactive context in which it participates and that this utterance will inevitably contribute to the contextual framework in terms of which the next action will be understood. Secondly, discursive action can also be directed towards the argumentative context of talk or writing (Billig 1991). Hence, a version or an argument produced in talk or writing can be formulated against some other version or an argument which is not explicitly present in the discourse. The contextual nature of information means that the way in which a version of information is constructed always depends on the interactive or argumentative context of talk, as well as on the pragmatic social purposes this version is designed to accomplish.

When studying information use as discursive action it is important to keep in mind that an attempt is made to render factual a version of state of things or events particularly in situations where the status of this version has become somehow disputable. If there is no dispute or delicate situation, a specific version can be offered as a self-evident common-sensical truth demanding no

further evidence to prove that "this is not just my opinion but a fact". In Extract 1, for example, the mother shifts her footing specifically because long hair is a delicate issue in the family. If this were not the case, she might not have shifted her footing at all when talking about long hair. In his study focusing on the social construction of scientific truths Bruno Latour (1987) points out that a scientific text tends to become more technical and rhetorical when the issues being discussed grow more questionable. Particularly in controversial or disputable parts of the text "people start to use text, files, documents, articles to force others to transform what was at first an opinion into a fact" (ibid., 30).

In other words, when some version of matters is accepted and/or held commonly as self-evident, one does not usually need to shift footing when producing the version. However, many times the participants in a conversation may take care of their accountability by producing a factual version and shifting their footing (cf. Clayman 1992). Naturally, only a detailed analysis can reveal the role of footing shifts in a specific situation and what kind pragmatic communicative purposes the footing shift and the constructed information are designed to accomplish.

When there are attempts to make factual a particular discursive version of events or state of things, information is often constructed as evidence to support the argument or factual version (cf. Pomerantz 1984). Recently, Michael K. Buckland (1991) has stressed the evidential nature of information. According to him, the nature of information as evidence is actualised when "information is used as evidence in learning, as the basis for understanding" (ibid., 44). He also emphasizes that the evidence is passive by nature in the sense that it does not in itself prove anything: before a thing or a message can be seen as evidence it has to be constructed as such. Our social constructionist approach is clearly different from Buckland's, but his idea of evidential information is useful anyway for studying information use as discursive action. Our approach focuses on the construction of evidential information that takes place in social interaction and communication, not inside an individual mind.

Often the authors or information sources being referred to in talk also have some kind of knowledge entitlement. When using knowledge entitlements as a resource in their talk people draw on the culturally shared idea that individuals in particular social categories (official or unofficial) are expected to know certain things or to have particular epistemological skills (Edwards & Potter 1992, 160, 176). Knowledge entitlement may often function as a warrant of the factual nature of a particular version of events or state of things. One way of how knowledge entitlements could be used in talk is illustrated in Extract 2:

Interviewer: What is the general picture of the housing situation in the town at the moment?

Interviewee: I would say that our general situation is relatively good in comparison with the national situation. For example, last summer there was an article in Suomen

Kunnat [a monthly magazine of Finnish municipalities/ KT & RS] where it was stated that the situation in our town is relatively good. Let's say that even if there are still homeless people, we have anyway managed quite well in comparison with the total number of inhabitants in our town.

Extract 2. (Source: Juhila 1993, 178/ translated by KT & RS)

In Extract 2, an official responsible for the housing issues of a Finnish town is interviewed. The reference made by the interviewee to an article published in the magazine Suomen Kunnat is a way to warrant the factual status of his version concerning the "relatively good" housing situation of homeless people in the town (Juhila 1993, 178). The title of the magazine and the credibility and neutrality commonly associated with it function as a warrant for the interviewee's claim. By using this kind of warrant the informant constructs a version that is hard to rebut or undermine. Although the shortness of Extract 2 does not allow us a thorough analysis of the context of informant's talk, we assume that there might also be other kinds of versions of the housing situation of the town.

Our approach to studying information use suits not only face-to-face situations (interviews, political or other kinds of television debates, meetings etc.), but it can also be used to analyse information use that takes place in written texts. For example, Potter and Quentin Halliday (1990) use discourse analysis to study how the knowledge entitlement of community leaders was used in the media as a device for warranting contrasting versions of the reasons which led to the riot in Handsworth, England. Another important paper demonstrating the potentials of social constructionist ideas in studying information use is analysis of how statistical information was used in a dispute about the (putative) lack of success of charity-supported cancer research in providing effective treatment (Potter, Wetherell & Chitty 1991).

COMPARING NOTIONS TO RELATED APPROACHES

As has already happened in some other fields, we believe that socially and dialogically oriented research approaches will also gain increasing popularity in information studies. The recent writings of Hjørland and Albrechtsen (1995), Rosenbaum (1993), Talja (1996) and Taylor (1991) are indicators of this kind of development in the study of information behaviour. In this respect, we find particularly important the contributions of Dervin who has stressed the constructive role of communication. In fact, her approach, communitarianism, comes very close to our social constructionist viewpoint. The most basic assumption of communitarianism is that knowing is a processual negotiation of meaning between people:

It [communitarianism /KT & RS] assumes that knowing is made and remade, reified and maintained, challenged and destroyed in communication: in dialogue, contact

and negotiation. In contrast to the other positions, it focuses on hows, rather than whos and whats.
(Dervin 1994, 377)

In communitarianism, communication is not conceived of as transfer of stable information packets but as processual interaction which constructs and produces events and states of things rather than neutrally describing them (cf. Dervin 1993). As we see in Dervin's conception, the nature of reality cannot be captured by merely observing the phenomenal world but different versions of reality are discursively and socially constructed in-between us. There may exist some consensus of the overall nature of reality in certain time-spaces whereas in others the factual status of different versions of reality or its specific parts is often debated⁶. Thus, social reality is created through conversational networks by using various argumentative resources and culturally developed tools to make some version factual. These assumptions characterizing communitarianism (Dervin 1994, 377–378) also form the background of the social constructionist approach presented in this paper. We have stressed that the most important things occur between people rather than within the individuals abstracted from their social relations (cf. Dervin et al. 1992, 16; Dervin 1993, 51–52) and that discursive action is joint action which deals with negotiation, debate and communicative sense-making of the world.

CONCLUSION

In the present paper we outlined an approach to studying information use as discursive action. We clarified briefly the social constructionist viewpoint and introduced a discourse analytic research methodology. By utilizing Goffman's idea of footing shifts we showed that it is possible to study how discursive constructions of information are contextually designed to serve different communicative purposes. We also stressed that footing shifts take place especially when there is some kind of dispute or delicate situation concerning the factual nature of a version or an argument. In such situations, information is often constructed as evidence supporting the version or argument that is occasionally produced in discourse. One important way of warranting the factuality of an account is to draw on the knowledge entitlement of the author or information source referred to in talk or writing.

The major advantage of the social constructionist perspective in studying information use is that information use is not considered as a process hidden in the "black box" between the ears of an individual. On the contrary, information use is seen as constructive action that can be studied as a real-world phenomenon rather than a theoretical abstraction. Furthermore, our approach to studying information use through its embodiment in discourse can be applied to various types of social situations where discursive construction of information

takes place. For example, the approach offers new possibilities for critical analyses of the ways by which different professional groups use information in public debates to further their interests. The approach can also be used to study how information is used in various kinds of meetings to support the arguments and versions produced or to undermine competing views. In total, social constructionist ideas do not only challenge the traditional research approaches to information use but also provide an alternative to them, thereby enriching the theoretical and methodological repertoire of the studies of information seeking and use.

NOTES

- 1 Space allows but a short presentation of social constructionism. Thus, the nuances of the various interpretations within this theoretical perspective will not be discussed. Actually, the term "social constructionism" dates back to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal work "The Social Construction of Reality". Since the publication of this work the term has, however, received new kinds of meanings which are not necessarily compatible with those proposed by Berger and Luckmann. Social constructionism stresses discursive constructionism as opposed to mental constructivism. Social constructionism has received theoretical influences, especially from linguistic philosophy (Austin 1962, Wittgenstein 1953), poststructuralist thinking (Foucault 1972) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984). For a detailed discussion of discursive social constructionism see especially Burr (1995), Gergen (1994) and Shotter (1993a; 1993b). Various versions of discursive social constructionism have gained more and more ground in several fields of human and social sciences, particularly in anthropology, communication science, cultural studies, psychology, social psychology and sociology. In information studies, we thus far have only a few studies demonstrating the critical potentials of discursive approaches (Budd & Raber 1996, Frohmann 1992; 1994, Rudd 1983).
- 2 For a critique of mechanical and individualistic assumptions within cognitive science and cognitive psychology, see, for example, Billig (1987, 118–155), Gergen (1994, 117–128) and Sampson (1993, 59–64).
- 3 It should be noted that discourse researchers do not deny all the results and insights of cognitive science and cognitive psychology. It can sensibly be argued that in being a participant in discursive action, one needs some sort of cognitive machinery: one must be able to perform social actions through discourse (Edwards & Potter 1992, 157).
- 4 The transcript symbols in Extract 1 are often used in discourse analytic and conversation analytic studies. Extended square brackets mark overlapping between utterances. Numbers in brackets indicate pauses timed to nearest tenth of second. Round brackets indicate that material in the brackets is either inaudible or there is doubt about its accuracy. For a fuller list of transcription symbols used in discourse analysis see Potter & Wetherell (1987, 188–189).
- 5 Goffman also analyses other kinds of "production" and "reception formats", but these other formats are not our concern here because we are only trying to illustrate how the footing idea could be applied to studying information use. The conceptual distinction between animator and author is enough for our purposes.
- 6 As Dervin et al. (1992, 19) remind us, it is not necessary that communication should result in some kind of harmony or hegemony of meanings. The factual status of

every single assertion or description can be actually or potentially disputable: there is no final guarantee that current "truths" or "meanings" will also be found acceptable in the future.

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