ABSTRACT

Agnotology was coined in an effort to create a title for a project to build an understanding of ignorance. The poster proposed seeks to re-introduce ignorance to information science through the comparison of the construction of ignorance in agnotology and the construction of information in information science. Looking at the way that models of ignorance parallel models of information, a greater understanding of the epistemic landscape is revealed. This conversation around the theoretical foundations of information science posed by this proposal may have a direct impact on both individuals and information contexts by reducing entropy and uncertainty in information science research. This poster is a step towards starting a conversation about connections and overlaps between information science and agnotology.

INTRODUCTION

When creating a science or academic discipline, the first step is often the establishment of a basic understanding of relevant phenomena (Kronegger, Mali, Ferligoj, & Doreian, 2015). Information science has defined itself according to its concern regarding what is seen, captured, and known, often conceptualized in terms of data, information, and knowledge (Belkin & Robertson, 1973; Borko, 1968; Brookes, 1980; Buckland, 1992a; Buckland 2012; Flori, 2006). While this framework of observation serves to illuminate much about the way humans access and experience information, there is a certain amount of dissonant ambiguity in the analytical framework of information science caused by transient and borrowed frameworks, which could be reduced through a better understanding of information’s counterpart, ignorance. Agnotology is a discipline which studies the use, maintenance, experience, and creation of ignorance (Proctor, 2008). Agnotology’s understanding of why ignorance forms, is created, or becomes impenetrable, may be easily integrated into information science’s conceptual toolbox because information science is a form of applied epistemology (Brookes, 1980; Buckland, 2012).

INFORMATION SCIENCE AND AGNOTOLOGY

Information science is oriented around the problem of connecting human generated knowledge to human users (Belkin & Robertson, 1973); the study of lack of transfer, and atrophy of transferred materials is integral to furthering information science. Agnotology is a term created by linguist Iain Boal in 1992, in an effort to create a title for a project dedicated to building an understanding of ignorance (Proctor, 2008). The project’s main proponents had not viewed clearer disciplinary titles such as ignorance studies and ignorance science as self-defeating (Proctor). Despite the inadvertent obfuscation of its name, agnotology should be addressed as the sibling of information science. If information science is a discipline that concerns itself with the forces governing the flow of information (Buckland, 1991), then agnotology is the other side of the same coin, similar, connected, but not quite the same.

This poster illustrates the impact agnotology can have in research in information science through presenting...
typologies of the two disciplines. Parallels are evident in both Buckland’s highly cited typology of information science offered in his 1991 article “Information as Thing” and Robert Proctor’s (2008) exploratory and founding typology that opens in, Agnotology. Buckland (1991) attempted to understand information within the context of three identified uses, and information processing (see Figure 1). Both typologies represent arbitrary classifications; due to the fact that analytical frameworks are always constructed. However, both Proctor and Buckland’s work represent an encompassing classification of research in both disciplines. The similarity between these two categorization schemes illustrates the way in which the study of ignorance and the study of information are linked.

CLASSIFYING IGNORANCE

In order to define a study of ignorance, Proctor seeks to describe ignorance itself. Proctor divides ignorance into three areas; ignorance as native state, ignorance as lost realm, and ignorance as strategic ploy (or active construct) (Proctor, 2008). Proctor begins by his introduction to agnotology by discussing ignorance as a native state. Proctor sees this type of ignorance as a resource, in that it becomes an exigency for the creation of new knowledge. This native ignorance is originary, or is due to a place where knowledge has not penetrated.

Ignorance in Proctor’s classification scheme also deals with ignorance as a lost realm, or selective choice. Proctor argues that this sort of ignorance is a product not just of inattention but also as a sort of transient evanescent noise. In some cases, this is the prevention of the transmission of knowledge through a deliberate choice to not incorporate objects into formalized knowledge systems; in other cases it is simply an unintended consequence of attention.

Proctor’s final classification is, ignorance as a strategic ploy (or as an active construct). This classification amalgamates two distinct phenomena, the withholding of information and the use of misdirection or deceit. When talking about ignorance as a strategic ploy, Proctor seems to be discussing the use of censorship and classification as a way to create ignorance strategically through prevention of access to knowledge. When Proctor describes an active construct, he seems to be describing a communication processes that involves the creation of misinformation (largely through public relations campaigns), which bears similarity to the phenomena noted in Fox’s work (1983). While secrecy involves preventing access, deception involves the performance and fabrication of a false reality (Chatman, 1996). Because these two phenomena are so distinct from each other they are separated in typography of ignorance (Figure 2) presented in this poster, despite being conglomerated in Proctor’s essay (2008).

CONCLUSION

Whatever paradigm adopted in information science research, a fundamental task concerns the construction of a theoretical framework (Brookes 1980). Theories of ignorance can be an important part of any information science paradigm and meta-theory formation, as they concern not the borders of research but also pose questions related to information science as a discipline with a central concern of the phenomena clustered around how knowledge comes to be (Buckland, 2012). Ultimately factoring ideas of ignorance, specifically within an epistemological framework of agnotology, may allow information science research to express value, impact, and magnitude more clearly.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This work is a tentative first step at exploring the connections between two disciplines. The potential of better understanding this connection has been demonstrated above. However, this initial recognition of similarities needs to be deepened through the development and application of a single classification methodology for defining a field of study related to
knowledge and the application of that template to both disciplines. This would resolve a tension that sits within this work, and strengthen the expressed connection between the two disciplines. Additionally, work is needed to develop a methodology for research in information science that explicitly uses agnotological theory to resolve issues and ambiguity with the research results.

REFERENCES


