

## The Relevant Clues: Information Behaviour and Assessment in Classic Detective Fiction

**Abstract:** The paper presents the first of two research project phases. It examines narrative analysis of fiction as an appropriate research methodology for studying information behaviour, using detective novels published 1920 - 1950. An information behaviour model has been generated, to be tested in Phase II against established models and other research.

**Résumé:** Cette communication présente la première de deux phases d'un projet de recherche. Il s'agit d'une analyse narrative d'œuvres de fiction comme méthodologie de recherche appropriée pour l'étude des comportements informationnels dans les romans policiers publiés entre 1920 et 1950. Le modèle de comportement informationnel qui s'en dégage sera testé lors de la seconde phase et sera comparé aux modèles et aux travaux de recherche existants.

### 1. Research Problem

The original research problem that was the genesis of this study was no more than a niggling question. Could fictionalized accounts of information behaviour provide insights into real-life information behaviour?

This original problem was then formalized into the following research questions:

1. Could narrative analysis of fictional texts be a viable research method for information studies, specifically information behaviour?
2. Do fictional texts provide a fully developed description of information behaviour(s), with adequate data for generating a model?
3. If a model of information behaviour can be extrapolated from fictional texts, does the model either
  - a. Reflect (an) existing and accepted information behaviour model(s); and/or
  - b. Is so closely aligned with existing information behaviour models as to suggest that that the fictional account is in some way based in reality, and perhaps a viable source of data for study?

In light of the above questions, detective fiction from published between 1920 and 1950 was chosen. A detective story of that period from an LIS perspective is a description of a very specific information behaviour: a question is posed (who committed the crime); information seeking behaviour begins (questioning those involved, searches into archives, compiling train schedules) until a critical mass of data is accumulated. The data is sifted for relevance by the detective, preferably with a less-intelligent and/or less-observant assistant to hand, who provides all the needed questions and obtuseness in lieu of the reader, as the answer is reached.

### 2. Rationale for Study

The story is a documentary space in which society vicariously shares in information behaviours that are considered either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in terms not of morality, but of credibility and likelihood. Narrative analysis has been utilized within literature studies as a research tool for various epistemological approaches, such as historicism, feminism, and post-modernism, in the belief that a text can hold information about human conditions.

Within Western fiction and storytelling in general, one of the most described, scrutinized, analyzed, and mentally duplicated information behaviours is that of the detective, on the trail of a murderer. This fictional behaviour, combined with this research method, may be of interest to scholars in library and information studies (LIS) for the following reasons:

- a) Literary analysis in general is a research method currently underutilized in LIS that may provide scholars with data and insights to inform research questions and suggest new research studies.
- b) The formalized processes of the classic detective novel provide a time-tested description of information seeking and sharing, in sufficient volume and detail for testing against established information behaviour models, as a test case of the research method.

### **3. Literature Review**

The suggestion that textual analysis, a traditional domain of Literature departments, be adopted as a research method in other scholarly fields, is not a new one. Analysis of narrative as a way to uncover qualitative data regarding social conditions has been proposed within sociology (Franzosi, 1998). Literary criticism of all types has been recommended as a way to find useful data for consumer research (Stern, 1989). Use of fiction, accompanied by textual analysis, to teach business ethics has been proposed (Kennedy and Lawton, 1992), and detective stories as a device to teach economic theory to students has similarly been suggested (Breit and Elzinga, 2002). In 1997 an LIS scholar, Clare Beghtol, suggested that narrative analysis, applied to stories, could provide insights into issues of information storage and retrieval.

However, narrative analysis applied to fictional texts for study of information behaviour appears to be so unusual as to be un-represented in LIS literature when a review of the databases LISA, LISTA, and Library Literature Full Text was conducted in December 2010 under the search term “narrative analysis”.

### **4. Research Method**

This project has been broken into two phases, and this presentation will review the first of the phases, completed in December 2010.

Phase I: Analysis of selected texts to a) test the hypothesis that narrative analysis of fiction can provide adequate detail or data to build a model of a specific information behaviour within a specific context; and b) then build a model of information behaviours of the stereotypical detective within detective mysteries written between 1920-1950.

Phase II: Review of established information behaviour models to discover if a) the model has already been developed in other research with live subjects; and b) if the model has

not already been created, if it is enough like existing models that it provides support for the hypothesis that what is described in fiction is grounded in generalized information behaviours of live human beings.

The research method used for this paper has been a two-year review and narrative analysis of more than fifty detective novels, primarily dating from what is termed the Golden Age of detective fiction (roughly 1920 – 1950). Works studied included well-known names as well as mystery authors less well-known to modern audiences.

Narrative analysis relies upon a story, with a beginning, middle, and end, that typically follows a sequence of events that can be chronologically understood. Narrative analysis takes the voice of a character within the story and examines it for themes, details, and coherence within the frame of the story (see Riessman, 1993 for fuller review of narrative analysis). In this study, narrative analysis examined the ‘voice’ or narrative of the detective, asking, what type of person is s/he? What actions, attitudes, and approaches to the task distinguish him or her from the other characters of the novel? What subset of behaviours specifically relate to information? Is there any information behaviour that is distinct to the detective and not shared by anyone else in the novel?

These novels have been used to compile a model of information behaviour, with a focus on the distinction between irrelevant and relevant information in regards to identifying murderer (discovery of the Truth, or correct identification, upon which the entire genre depends). For this reason, detective mystery novels from what often popularly termed the “classic” or “Golden Age” were chosen.

At that time, the Detection Club and its illustrious founders (such as Dorothy Sayers, Austin Freeman, and G.K. Chesterton) had set a standard for mystery stories, as embodied in its Oath for new members, that the story’s solution had to be built from clues shared with the reader, and not rely on women’s intuition, or Act of God, for example, to present the solution (see the Wikipedia entry for “Detection Club” for an easily accessible transcription of the Oath). While not everyone writing at that time adhered to those rules, for the purposes of this study only those stories that are built on a logical sequence of presented facts and events were included as texts for research.

## **5. Summary of Findings**

After reviewing the texts selected for this study and completing Phase I, some answers to the research questions have been reached. Thus far the research method of narrative analysis of fictional texts appears to be a viable one. The texts have provided enough consistent detail of information behaviours and processes to generate a model of information behaviour, which will be presented at the conference. Although the model needs to be tested against those established models of information behaviour generated by scholars with live research subjects, the model developed by this study meets what can be termed a common-sense test. Although the events of the stories reviewed may be fantastical, the actions and processes related to information are not. They are typically ones that make sense from a daily activity, human experience perspective.

What the developed model indicates is that within the detective novel, the success of the detective hinges entirely upon the fundamental characteristics of the detective as an information seeker and processor. The distinguishing characteristic of the detective as a

distinct role within the story is her/his greater capacity to gather, sort, and process information, and pinpoint what is relevant and what is superfluous to finding the answer sought. Key to that capacity is not only his/her superior intelligence, but also a mental and emotional flexibility in sourcing and approaching data.

The question then becomes, when analysing these texts, do human beings in general consider the ability to solve a problem through the processing of information merely a function of intelligence, or is it about particular approaches to information that result in success?

While the developed model points out some ways in which human beings in general may regard the process of finding an answer (the murderer) to a problem (whodunit), and suggests that narrative analysis of texts may reward researchers interested in studying information behaviour, other potential implications of the findings may be worth contemplation. For example, do authors influence the readers with suggestions of approaches to resolving information needs? If that is the case, should LIS go beyond using storytelling as a way to teach children concepts (Frieden and Elliott, 2007; Ryokai, Vaucelle, and Cassell, 2003), and consider using it to teach university students and adults more complex concepts of information literacy?

## 6. References

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