POWER MATTERS: FOUCAULT’S *POUVOIR/SAVOIR* AS A CONCEPTUAL LENS IN INFORMATION/KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

> Truism that has become a cliché

> Information behaviour researchers have for many years been criticised (Frohmann, 1992; Dervin, 1999; Olsson, 2005; 2009) for their failure to address issues of power relations

> Such failure is not neutral but serves to reify existing power relations & societal inequity
INFORMATION AS TRUTH

- Enlightenment Legacy
- Objectivity – Rationalism
- Research as ‘Discovery’
- Knowledge as Truth, Facts
- Authority as Intrinsic
RUMMAGING IN THE TOOLBOX

Foucault wanted his work:

“...to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area... I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers.” (Foucault, 1974)
CASE STUDIES

Examples drawn from the authors own studies

> Academic Information Researchers
> Theatre Professionals
> Journalists
> HR Professionals
LANGUAGE IS NOT NEUTRAL!

Cogito ergo sum

$E = mc^2$

Does my bum look big in this?
"For Foucault there is no external position of certainty., no universal understanding that is beyond history and society”.

Rabinow

• What are the discursive rules that determine what can or cannot be said in relation to a topic at a given point in space and time?

• How is a given speech act positioned in relation to existing discourses – established ways of speaking about a topic?

• What are the consequences of this positioning?

• Whose interests are served by this positioning?

• Whose interests are negated?
“When you're talking about us, you're talking about an organisation that is run by accountants. They're not interested in people's stories as much as they are in numbers, bottom line.” (HR professional in Insurance Company)
Information researchers made sense of Dervin’s work through the lens of their existing discursive frameworks.

Three broad categories:

Conceptual Frameworks (e.g. Cognitivism)

“…I had discovered social constructivism and discourse analysis…And I was from the beginning finding her to be a social constructivist…”

Other Fields (e.g. Sociology, Psychology)

“…You need to understand that my orientation to her was as a linguist … I am first and foremost a linguist…”

National social background

“…we have very strong tradition of welfare state, social structures, social they are always here. We are respecting them. Maybe we are not so fanatic individualists as Americans are.”
He was not of an age, but for all time! (Jonson, First Folio)

‘Shakespeare as Genius’

Values Authenticity

theatre professionals as ‘true custodians of Shakespeare’

You know, I don’t think you can really understand Shakespeare, until you perform it ... the plays were written to be performed, not read. (Ned Poins, actor)

It’s kind of amazing to think of yourself as being part of a tradition that goes back through the centuries ... to Shakespeare and the Globe. And I think you feel a responsibility to carry on that tradition, to honour it. (Seyton, actor)
all participants’ accounts also draw on another contradictory discourse values creativity

We wanted to do something very new with this production – very political... (Puck, actor)

You need to find new settings, new approaches to the design ... get away from ‘pumpkin pants’ Shakespeare! (Sebastian, designer)
“We should admit ... that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” Foucault

We relate new knowledge to established knowledge power structures e.g. recognized authors, theories institutions, etc

Inductive view of Power – based on our Acceptance
Information researchers conscious of citation’s strategic importance – “rules of the game”

…using Dervin in your research, citing her papers, gives your own work a certain credibility in the eyes of other researchers … they already know – or think they know – her ideas … her name gives the work more weight – you need that, especially when you’re starting out…

Links participant’s own work to established networks of power/knowledge
“… because I want to make ideas that are not so familiar in information studies, to get them known, to get them more familiar, because you are able to read Dervin's work as well from the … social constructivist point of view, as well as from the constructivist point of view … using Dervin makes my new ideas more acceptable…”.

- render the new approach/theory more “acceptable” to its intended audience
- emphasise relationship to the author’s work
- cloak the unfamiliar in the power/knowledge of an established author construct
"They should put themselves in the shoes of consultancy. We're paying a lot of money to support an HR function. Add the value to the business. If that was outsourced they'd be under pretty significant scrutiny in terms of return" (Nick, middle manager)

"You want to put it in their [line managers’] language if you can. So if you're trying to sell an idea, you sell it through the business impact for example" (HR professional).
FIND THE SOURCE, FIND THE HOOK

> Talking to a person, whether expert or sufferer, personalises story – more than a collection of scientific facts

*The science can be dry… There’s nothing like having a committed researcher to bring it to life…*

> Authenticity discourse – makes it ‘real’ for reader

*It sounds cynical but talking to someone about what it’s like to live with a disease brings it home to people. They can imagine what it’s like.*

> Provides ‘hook’ for story – narrative arc for story
Talking to an acknowledged ‘expert’ gives the story authority

I’ve interviewed the CEO of the National Prescribing Service that’s a government body. You know can’t really question that authority.

Parallels academic citation as a power/knowledge strategy
Gives access to information exactly tailored to their need

I know if I find the right person and ask them the right questions, they can give me what I need to know. I won’t have to wade through hundreds of papers

Current information and later developments
AFFECTIVE DISCOURSE

Affect – ‘emotional truth’ – played an acknowledged role in theatre professionals’ interactions with one another.

I was having trouble with one scene, so I went and talked to another member of the company, who I knew had played the part before... I asked him “What should I be feeling at this point?” (Timon, Actor)

For theatre professionals, ‘emotional truth’ is both the subject & the generator of discourse:

> a socially-validated practice
> an acknowledged source of authority
CONCLUSIONS

> Discourses shape the power relations that characterise a particular social space/information environment

> Power/knowledge matters - some discourses are more authoritative than others in a given context and will regulate peoples' information practices
IMPLICATIONS

Information researchers need to ask themselves:

> What discourses do people draw on in a particular empirical context?

> How does this impact on the way people position themselves and present information?

> What types of information/knowledge and what information sources are considered as authoritative in a particular context?

> What legitimation strategies are being used?

> What implications does this have, e.g. What types of information/knowledge are negated? Whose voices are being marginalised?