

Paranormal information seeking in everyday life: the paranormal in information action

Jarkko Kari

Department of Information Studies

University of Tampere

csjakar@uta.fi

Introduction

The purpose of this licentiate's study is to examine information action (needs, seeking and use) in the context of paranormal information (information about the paranormal or information supposedly acquired by paranormal means) in a particular situation, as experienced by people who are interested in the supernatural. The central aspects of the research are its focus on the individual, situation, meanings and process, which should amount to a holistic picture of information action. The study is primarily theory-driven, and its conceptual framework is grounded upon Dervin's sense-making theory. The basic elements, which are situation, gap (need) and use, are enhanced by two new elements, construction (seeking) and barrier. This is done in an effort to develop a theory of information action that is more concrete and unambiguous than the original sense-making theory. The main objective of the study at hand, however, is to analyze the content of information action, rather than its structure. The research is qualitative and somewhat exploratory by its nature. The data is constituted by 20 micro-moment time-line interviews which were conducted in Finland in 1995. Right now, the material is being coded for analysis.

Points of departure

During the last couple of decades, it has been noted that interest in paranormal or supernatural phenomena has grown substantially in America and Europe ([Heino, 1994](#)). Today interest and belief in paranormal phenomena is remarkably common ([Parsons, 1992](#); [Sparks et al., 1995](#)) -- perhaps even more common than ever before (see [Griffon, 1991](#)). The figures on the share of believers in the paranormal vary, but on the basis of several surveys, it can be said that well over half of population believes in the existence of paranormal phenomena ([Blackmore, 1990](#)). Paranormal beliefs are universal, which suggests that they are very important to the human being ([Schumaker, 1987](#)). It would strike one as natural then that supernatural experiences and interest in these would tend to arouse in people a need to know more about these phenomena.

I call information relating to paranormal phenomena *paranormal information*. Little is known about how this information is manifested in information action, that is, in information needs, seeking and use. Nevertheless the title of a leader by Tapani Kuningas2 - "Need for information is growing" ([Kuningas, 1995](#)) -- tells us something. From the viewpoint of scientific research, paranormal information is like a black box: the scientific community is aware of it, but scholars either belittle it or they lack the courage to take a look what is inside. This is why hardly anything at all is known about the relationship between paranormal phenomena and information action, or, to put it differently, between paranormal information and everyday life. As far as I know, my master's thesis, *Paranormal information seeking in everyday life -- part I* ([Kari, 1996](#)), was the first and

apparently still the only scientific study in the world that examines paranormal information in information action. That study merely succeeded in scratching the surface of the phenomena in question, so that there is an obvious need for further research.

My licentiate thesis in preparation is a continuation of my master's thesis. These two studies are meant to complement each other. Being a survey, the purpose of my master's thesis was to map the general features of needs and seeking of paranormal information. On the other hand, with the help of my licentiate thesis, which is based on interview material, I hope to "penetrate the surface" and to discover ways to interpret the results of my earlier study.

The current study looks at information action in the context of paranormal phenomena. In practice, this means examining needs, seeking and use of paranormal information in a particular situation, as experienced by people who are interested in the supernatural. The features that centrally characterize my study are its focus on the individual, situation, and process, which, taken together, should amount to a holistic picture of information action. Special attention is paid to the meanings that are given to paranormal information in everyday action. This is facilitated by taking Brenda Dervin's *sense-making theory* (see e.g. [Dervin, 1992](#)) as a metatheory or a background theory for my study.

Outline of a theory

Because the study at hand is primarily theory-driven, the conceptual framework that I am using is to be introduced properly. The theoretical basis has three levels: metatheory, formal theory and unit theory. Due to space restrictions, I will only present the first two levels briefly.

Metatheory

Sense-making theory. The main part of the metatheory used in the study is constituted by the sense-making theory. In essence, this theory generally deals with how an individual makes sense of his environment in a given situation, and specifically how seeking information serves bridging "gaps" or "discontinuities" that the individual has perceived in reality. In the case of my own study, this is a question of how people make sense of their situation, their need for paranormal information, their seeking and/or finding this information, as well as their using of the information.

I chose the sense-making theory for three reasons. Firstly, the theory enables me to scrutinize the meanings that are given to the paranormal, on the one hand, and to information action, on the other, which occupies a prominent position in my study. Secondly, the sense-making theory presupposes that information action is not a static state, but a dynamic process, which is another important aspect of the current study. Thirdly, the approach makes it possible for me to get at a particular, actual situation that a person has gone through.

Basic concepts. General background concepts also belong to metatheory. They have little analytical value, but knowing them is vital for comprehending the whole study. Three basic concepts worth defining here are "paranormal phenomenon", "paranormal information" and "information action".

Probably the most typical way to define *paranormal phenomenon* is to regard it as a hypothetical phenomenon which contradicts the scientific laws that are taken for laws of nature -- or, more generally -- the most fundamental suppositions and principles of science -- or, most generally -- today's scientific conception of the world (see [Alcock, 1981](#); [Alcock, 1991](#); [Collins & Pinch, 1979](#); [Kurtz, 1985](#)), on the one hand, and the expectations of common sense and our everyday experiences ([Kurtz, 1985](#); [Schumaker, 1987](#); [Tobacyk & Milford, 1983](#)), on the other hand. Although the role of the supernatural in information action is explored from the angle of those who believe in the paranormal, *my dissertation*

will not take any stand whatsoever on the existence of these phenomena.

The concept of *paranormal information* is easy to define once you know what "paranormal phenomenon" means: paranormal information is information about paranormal phenomena. However, the term can also be used to refer to information that has supposedly been acquired by supernatural means.

Information action is a term that comes from Wersig and Windel (1985). It can be defined as action that "involves various forms of users' conceptual and physical contacts with information" ([Erdelez, 1997](#)). "Information action" is a broad concept which contains the three major stages of an information process: information need, seeking and use (see [Vakkari, 1997](#)).

Formal theory

Information process. The analytical core of the sense-making theory is formed by the famous triangle of situation-gap-use (Fig. 1) which is an attempt at depicting the information process. Before explaining what these concepts or stages mean, I would like to express my dissatisfaction with this triangle. The problem with the triangle is that it is too abstract and metaphorical. This in turn leads to the model being overly simple and ambiguous. For example, such a central concept as "information seeking" is missing altogether.

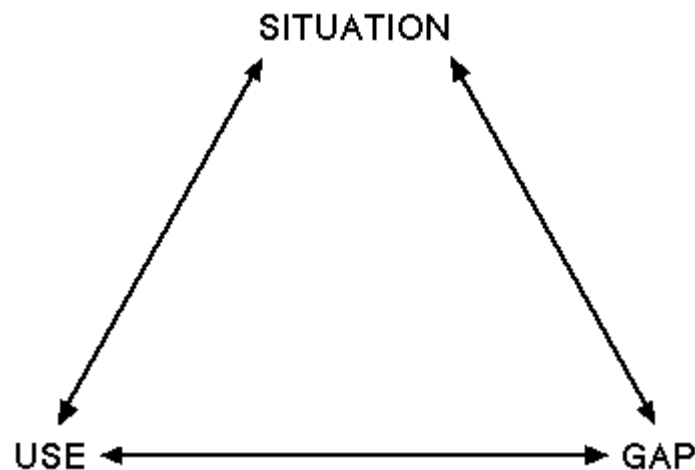


Figure 1. The sense-making triangle: situation-gap-use (source: [Dervin, 1992](#))

In the spirit of the sense-making theory, the stage of information seeking could be called "construction". So instead of the *triangle* of situation-gap-use, we now have the *square* of situation-gap-construction-use or, in more analytical terms, the square of situation-need-seeking-use. After closer consideration, however, it seems that "situation" is different in quality from the other concepts. "Need", "seeking" and "use" are stages of information action, whereas "situation" is rather the context of this process than a part of it. Because I am also interested in problems in information action faced by the individual, I will add *barrier* in the middle of the model (see Fig. 2).

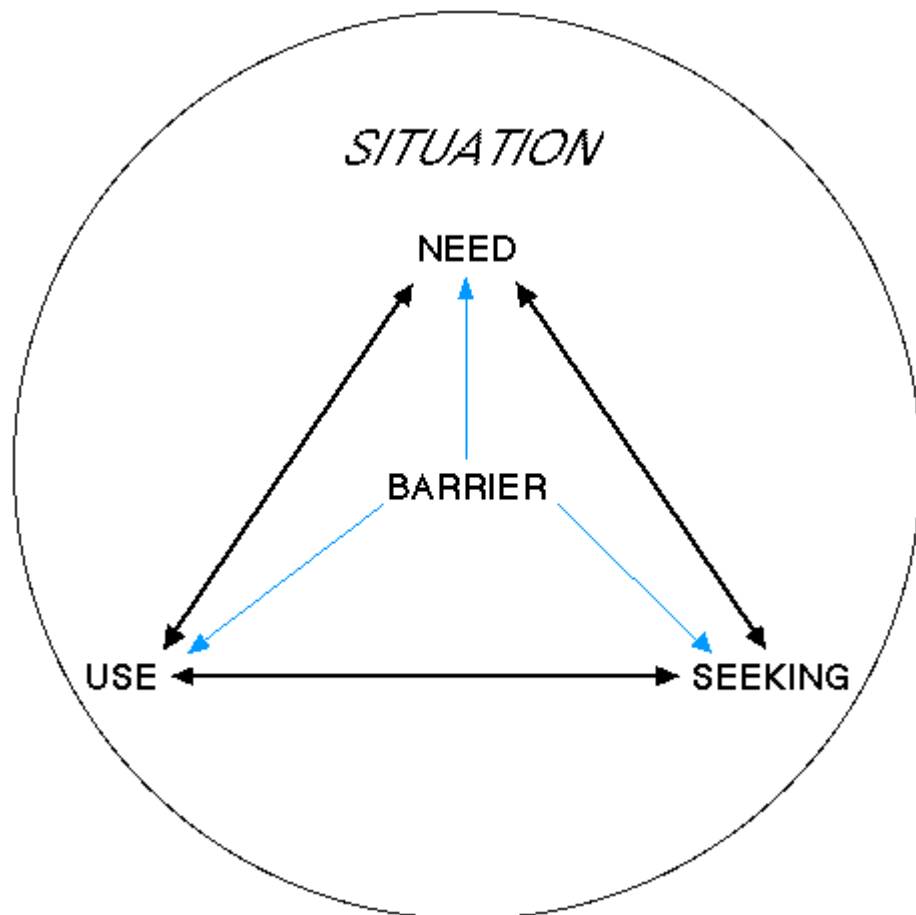


Figure 2. The process of information action: need, seeking and use (interfered with by barrier) in situation.

Therefore, the main analytical concepts of my study are situation, gap/information need, construction/information seeking, information use and barrier. Except for the first and last one, these also stand for the various stages of the information process.

Major stages of the process. At the general level, Dervin defines *situation* as "an epistemological time-space context that an individual would recognize as being meaningfully separate from other epistemological contexts" ([Halpern & Nilan, 1988](#)). In other words, situation is a point in space and time ([Perttula, 1994](#)) in which the individual constructs meanings ([Dervin, 1983](#)).

The concept of *gap* means "an unclear aspect of a situation that a person feels the need to clarify in order to continue movement in a direction that the individual considers to be constructive or desirable" ([Halpern & Nilan, 1988](#)). In the current study, I consider "gap" to be analytically synonymous with "information need". *Information need* is the individual's conception of what information he needs to satisfy a more basic need of his ([Wilson, 1977](#); see also [Wilson, 1981](#)), that is, to achieve his goal.

According to an English language dictionary, *construction* is "the creating of something such as an idea" or "the way in which people can interpret something that is written, said, or done" (see [Collins, 1987](#)). In sense-making terms, construction signifies the individual's making of sense of whatever is puzzling about the situation. The more technical term for "construction" is "information seeking". I define *information seeking* as a purposeful process in which the individual attempts to find information through information sources in order to satisfy his information need (see [Krikelas, 1983](#); [Wilson, 1977](#)). Information seeking includes the accidental discovery of information as well.

If construction stands for building a bridge across the gap, then *use* means "the outcome or outcomes of Sense-Making aimed at addressing gaps" ([Halpern & Nilan, 1988](#)). Thus

information use refers to how the individual applies the acquired information in his (inner or outer) action (cf. [Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997](#); [Ward, 1983](#)).

Barrier in information action can be broadly defined as a factor which the individual perceives as hindering his information-related activities. All difficulties that the individual encounters at any stage of the process are such barriers.

Research problem

My licentiate study has two principal problems or objectives. In their order of importance, these are: 1) to get an understanding of information action in the context of paranormal phenomena and paranormal information, and 2) to develop a theory of information action as a holistic process. In other words, my current work concentrates on the *content* of information action. Examining its *structure* will have to wait until the doctoral thesis to come.

On the ground of the theory and objectives of my study arise the six main research questions along with their subquestions:

1. How and why do people get to know about the paranormal in the first place?
2. In what kind of situations do people need paranormal information?
 - what is their Situation Movement State³ in these situations?
 - do they consider their situations as perfectly natural or do they perceive some supernatural elements in these situations?
 - what goals do they have in these situations?
3. What are people's needs for paranormal information like?
 - why do they need this information?
 - about what topics do they need this information?
 - what questions do they have in their mind?
 - on what entities do these needs focus?
 - on what time do these needs focus?
 - what is the primary criterion for seeking this information?
4. How do people seek and/or find paranormal information?
 - a) which strategies of information seeking do they use?
 - b) what sources of information do they use?
 - what sort of sources do they use?
 - how do they find these sources?
 - why do they use these sources?
5. c) what sense do they make of the received information?
 - about what topics is the information?
 - on what entities does the information focus?
 - on what time does the information focus?
 - do they get the information by normal or paranormal means?
 - to what extent does the information satisfy their information needs?
6. How do people use paranormal information?
 - to what purposes do they apply this information?
 - what negative effects does this information have?
7. How do people experience barriers to information action?
 - what sort of barriers are perceived?
 - at which stages of the process do these barriers emerge?

Work plan and its execution

The study is being conducted at the University of Tampere, Department of Information Studies, Finland. I began working on the research project in October 1996, and I expect to bring the study to its conclusion by March 1999. Below I will

introduce to you the various stages of the research process. These stages are not in a strictly linear (chronological) order, but in the order in which they should progress in the "ideal" case. In addition, the stages are not distinct, for they do overlap each other. Because of the lack of a scholarship, my work advanced quite slowly from October 1996 until July 1997.

Literature review

After reading hundreds of articles and books on supernatural phenomena and paranormal information as well as on information needs, seeking and use, I finally finished the literature review in February 1998. The review concentrated on the theory basis of my thesis, leaving the presentation of other empirical studies until the final report.

Work plan

At this very moment, you are reading a summary of the original 40-page research proposal that I composed in March 1998. That paper described the intended operationalization of the unit theory and the planned analysis of the interview data. The work plan is still in a continuous flux, for it must be revised time after time as the work proceeds.

Data collection

The method of data collection was an application of the so-called "micro-moment time-line interview" (see Dervin, 1983; Dervin, 1992) which is the main method associated with the sense-making theory. This interview technique facilitates the accurate but understanding investigation of information action as a process.

In actual fact, the interviews were conducted as early as in the summer of 1995, at the same time as the survey data were collected for my master's thesis. This was done because I had the unique opportunity to interview some of those people who had also filled in the questionnaire for my other study. In this way, the data from the two corpuses could be examined together, thus combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. There were altogether 20 adult interviewees, and the interviews were conducted personally by me during some 40 days.

Preparing the data for analysis

This means transforming the interviews from speech on audio tapes into text on computer. The recorded interviews were not transcribed until last autumn (1997), owing to the lack of time. The data were initially fed to a word processing program. After this, the interview texts were transformed into a format that is acceptable to *NUD*IST*, the analysis program that I am using as a central tool in my study.

Data analysis

This stage involves three steps. First, a code list which reflects the research questions is developed. The codes represent concepts and their categories, and they will make it possible for me to do complex analyses on the data, as well as to construct and revise theory. Second, the interview data is coded with the codes from the code list. The code list must be flexible enough to allow for changes in it. Third, answers to the research questions are sought by examining the database code by code, across cases, what the content of the pieces of text that are coded with each code is. In this case, the "case" or unit of analysis is a process of information action, not an individual.

In taking the above-mentioned steps of analysis, I will be greatly aided by *NUD*IST*, a versatile qualitative analysis software package. It enables me to do quite intricate and powerful analyses on the interview data. Right now, I am taking my second step, that is, coding the interviews.

Reporting on the results

Principally, this means doing the final version of my licentiate's thesis. I have not really planned how to accomplish this, because it is not timely yet. However, an article on the results of my current study will probably be published in *Informaatiotutkimus [Information Studies]* which is the one and only refereed journal on information studies in Finland. It is at least remotely possible that I will also give a speech on the results in an international conference some time and place next year, or that an article will be published in an international journal in the future.

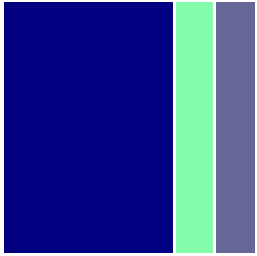
Notes

1. The paper was presented at ISIC'98 Doctoral Workshop, 12 August 1998, Sheffield, UK.
2. Tapani Kuningas has been the chief editor of *Ultra* since its beginning, that is, 1975. *Ultra* is the most widely-read magazine in Finland dealing with the paranormal.
3. This means the way in which the individual feels that his movement through time-space is hindered (see Dervin, 1983), or, more generally, the nature of the individual's movement through time-space.

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