Metatheoretical Snowmen II*

*Metatheoretical Snowmen was presented for the first time at the ASIS&T Annual Meeting in 2009. The original proposal received high scores from reviewers and at the event an enthusiastic audience filled a large conference room to capacity. This version, Metatheoretical Snowmen II, reproduces the format with five new information scientists and the metatheories they champion.

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ABSTRACT
Metatheory is the highest level conceptual device used in research and determines a way of thinking and speaking about reality and its information behavior. Today, numerous metatheories exist in information studies and create a dynamic climate, yet also some confusion. This panel aims to demystify metatheory by addressing the matter in a playful, comparative, competitive spirit. Articulate champions of five major metatheories will be given an opportunity to cast their metatheory onto the life and information experience of an ordinary and affable persona: a snowman. The vivid renderings of the snowman and its information world will bring the features of each metatheory into clear view. To invigorate both discussants and the audience, the presentations will be judged by a jury appointed on the spot. The panelist who offers the most illuminating exposition will take home a trophy while the audience gains new understanding.

Keywords
Metatheory, theory, information behavior

BACKGROUND
Metatheory is, “the philosophy behind the theory, the fundamental set of ideas about how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched” (Bates, 2006, p. 2). A commitment to a metatheory orients research and suggests a methodology and the meaning of major concepts of study. Unlike a field such as biology, that operates within one dominant paradigm (the theory of evolution), information science is an interdiscipline with many metatheories in play. This has always been the case: 75 years ago, the first textbook on library science tellingly acknowledged sociological, psychological, and historical perspectives (Butler, 1933). Recently, in a landmark book on information behavior (Fisher, Erdelez & McKechnie, 2005) Bates identified 13 metatheories and noted, “we now have a confusion of many approaches competing for attention.” In short, one can glean that metatheory: 1.) Is a critical clarifying device for research. 2.) Leads to different perspectives on information behavior and, 3.) Is an unruly topic for students and experts alike.

THE PROCESS
The panel will begin with an introduction to metatheory by the moderator. Then, five thought-leaders of their respective positions will provide succinct (5-minute) overviews of the metatheories they champion and employ. For 2011, philosophical-analytic, user-centered design, critical studies, an evolutionary approach, and cognitivism have been chosen as exemplar metatheories. To make these abstract matters accessible to all, and to enable comparison and contrast, discussants will explain their metatheory in the context of a snowman. All presenters will address three fundamental questions from the perspective of their metatheory: 1.) What does the snowman’s reality look like? 2.) What constitutes information for the snowman? and, 3.) What is information behavior in the snowman’s world? An abbreviated version of the exercise, illustrating the metatheories of pragmatism and cognitivism appears below:

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AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT AND THE SNOWMAN TROPHY
To motivate the panelists, the event will be staged as a competition. Which speaker offers the most lucid and compelling presentation? At the beginning of the session, a jury of three judges will be drawn from the audience, composed of a senior academic, a junior academic, and a student. In real time, the jury will rank each presentation on a scale of 1 (“incomprehensible!”) to 10 (“eureka!”). The presenter with the highest score will be awarded the Snowman Trophy which is held for a year or until the next Metatheoretical Snowmen panel, which will engage a different set of metatheories. At the conclusion of the session, a discussant will provide synthesizing observations. Each speaker will be timed and kept on schedule to allow a minimum of 30 minutes for audience questions and discussion.

THE PANELISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION

Jenna Hartel – Moderator
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto
Dr. Hartel will launch the session with an introduction to metatheory and its role in information behavior research. She will profile each panelist, assemble the jury, and keep the event on track.

Jonathan Furner – Philosophical-analytic
Associate Professor, Department of Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles
Dr. Furner will render the philosophical-analytic approach, in which “the classical techniques of the discipline of philosophy are brought to bear on information-related matters” (Bates, 2005, p. 11).

Soo Young Rieh – User-Centered Design
Associate Professor, School of Information, University of Michigan
Dr. Rieh will represent user-centered design, in which “the development and human testing of information organization and information system designs is seen as a path to both scientific understanding and improved information access” (Bates, 2005, p. 13-14).

Mike Olsson – Critical Studies
Senior Lecturer, Journalism, Information & Media Studies Group, University of Technology, Sydney
Dr. Olsson will champion critical studies, an approach in which “the hidden power relations and patterns of documentation within society are revealed and debunked” (Bates, 2005, p. 11).

Marcia Bates – Evolutionary
Professor Emerita, School of Education and Information Studies, UCLA
Dr. Bates will address an evolutionary stance, in which “the insights of biology and evolutionary psychology are brought to bear on information-related phenomena” (Bates, 2005, p. 14).

Nicolas Belkin – Cognitivism
Professor, School of Communication, Information & Library Studies, Rutgers University
Dr. Belkin will represent cognitivism, a perspective arising out of cognitive science in which “the thinking of the individual person operating in the world is the dominating focus of research on information seeking, retrieval, and use” (Bates, 2005, p. 13).

Andrew Dillon – Discussant
Dean and Professor, School of Information, University of Texas, Austin
Drawing upon his expertise across information studies, Dr. Dillon will host a discussion and provide concluding remarks

The Jury
A jury of three will be drawn from the audience and include a senior academic, a junior academic, and a student. In real time, the jury will rank each presentation on a scale of 1 (“incomprehensible!”) to 10 (“eureka!”).
REFERENCES

