

Informational balance

Hugh Samson

Abstract

Introduction. *Evoking both activity and stillness, balance has been a concept of interest within academic research for centuries. In recent decades, the concept of balance has also garnered attention within information science.*

Design/Methodology/Approach. *This conceptual paper is based upon a synthesis of selected articles and themes concerning the subject of balance as well as an analysis of recent writings from the field of information science. It draws in particular from work regarding the construct of informational balance.*

Findings. *Information scientists have analysed the shifting balance of scientific information flows between nations as well as the balance of intellectual trade between information science and its cognate disciplines. Studies have also examined strategies to identify and implement balanced, scalable and sustainable online instruction within information institutions, and investigated issues of work-life balance among information professionals and scientists.*

Originality/Value. *The construct of informational balance has emerged as a particularly noteworthy application of the concept of balance, and subsequent to its origin it has been taken up by a number of additional information scientists. In shining a light on informational balance this paper aspires to lay the groundwork for fresh elaboration of the construct and for future innovative research in this area.*

Keywords: *informational balance, information behaviour, slow movement*

Introduction

Evoking both activity and stillness, balance has been a concept of interest within academic research for centuries (Kaye, 2014; Matuska and Christiansen, 2008; Christiansen and Matuska, 2006; Alter, 1999). To balance is to estimate and to ponder a matter, to weigh multiple aspects or considerations against one another in order to determine which preponderate (Daniels, 2016; Sternberg, 1998). To balance is also to bring into and maintain in counterpoise one thing against, by, or with another so as to establish equilibrium, erectness and steadiness (Saul, 2004; Guest, 2002). As an apparatus for weighing, a balance consists of a beam poised so as to move freely on a central pivot with a scale pan at each end. A state of balance occurs when stability is produced via the interaction of competing and relatively equal forces (Coulson, 2021; Sheehan, 2005).

Balance in information science

In recent decades, the concept of balance has garnered interest within information science. Adopting a pure bibliometric approach, for example, Giovanni Abramo, Ciriaco D'Angelo and Massimiliano Carloni (2018) have proposed a potential tool to measure the shifting balance of scientific information flows between nations. The information that is traced by the tool is that which is produced and exchanged within the international scientific community by means of publications and relevant citations. A description of the theoretical foundation of the tool is provided by the authors along with a summary of empirical testing regarding the scientific production of four distinct nations. Aimed at informing research policy, it is suggested that the tool may contribute to annual reports of science and technology indicators.

Blaise Cronin and his collaborators (Cronin and Meho, 2008; Cronin and Pearson, 1990) have analysed the balance of intellectual trade between information science and its cognate disciplines. The findings of their large-scale, longitudinal citation analyses reveal the extent to which information science draws upon and, in turn, contributes to the ideational substrates of related academic domains. Their data demonstrate that over time information science has become less introverted and a more successful exporter of ideas than was previously the case. More specifically, information science has started to draw increasingly heavily upon the literatures of disciplines such as computer science, engineering and management, while also beginning to contribute more significantly to the literatures of these disciplines itself.

Studies have also examined strategies to implement balanced, scalable and sustainable online instruction within information institutions. Indeed, Carrie Moran and Rachel Mulvihill (2019) have explored efforts to achieve balance between impersonal online tutorials and time-intensive embedded services, Michael Courtney and Sara Wilhoite-Mathews (2015) have detailed how various online learning management systems and tools may be utilised to generate investment and ownership in the learning process, and Steve Borrelli, Corey Johnson and Lara Cummings (2009) have investigated the application of information literacy education within a major research institution and highlighted the various methods that asynchronous learning can be integrated into the curriculum. Additional work in this area has been completed by Rebecca Kuglitsch (2015), Jody Nelson, et al. (2015) and Patricia Hartman, et al. (2014).

The challenge of maintaining work-life balance among information professionals and information scientists, and the policy implications thereof, has also been studied. A survey of work-life balance perceptions among married female information professionals within academic institutions in South-East Nigeria conducted by Ijeoma Ibegbulam and Anthonia Ejikeme (2021), for instance, found that information professionals possess a positive perception of family and organisational factors as they relate to work-life balance, and offer strategies that could serve to enhance balance. Exploring the attitudes of urban academic information professionals within the United States regarding what they envision an ideal work-life balance to be, Tamara Townsend and Kimberly Bugg (2018; 2020) also offer policy recommendations to assist with myriad workplace issues including employment motivation, recruitment, retention and satisfaction. The work-life balance challenges of information scientists have been probed by Guillaume Cabanac and James Hartley (2013), who suggest that

extended weekend work hours may be one of the principal mechanisms that scientists rely upon to cope with increasing publication demands.

Informational balance

Emerging as a particularly noteworthy application of the concept of balance within information science is Elizabeth Poirier's (2012) construct of informational balance. Written while Poirier was a doctoral student within City University, London's School of Informatics' Department of Information Science, her unpublished thesis, *Slow information in theory and practice: a qualitative exploration into the implications of a slow perspective of human information behaviour*, examines whether and how a slow perspective impacts upon and relates to theories of information behaviour and everyday information practices. Surfacing therein, informational balance was reported in practice as a state that is attained via the adoption of elements of a slow approach, which in turn may be understood to encourage everyday information literacy. A slow approach is comprised of principles and values derived from the slow movement, an umbrella term that refers to a number of areas that have been organised around the concept of slow, the principal and founding branch of which is slow food (Portinari, 1989; Petrini and Pandovani, 2005).

Poirier's project progressed through three distinct yet related phases. First, the conceptual foundations of a slow approach were developed via a literature synthesis, and by drawing upon existing conceptions of the information society. Second, a delphi study was conducted in order to engage information behaviour experts within a discussion concerning the relevance of a slow approach to disciplinary matters in the field. Third, a focus group session was held in order to engage slow adherents in a discussion regarding their attitudes towards a slow approach as it relates to everyday information practices. Informational balance arose during the third phase of Poirier's research, which, like those that preceded it, was guided by a social constructivist methodology that encouraged both the researcher and her participants to engage in conscious, deliberate consideration of their own and one another's opinions via connection and discussion, reflecting the slow approach that the research sought to explore.

Topics discussed during the focus group include how people apply a slow approach in everyday contexts and whether a slow approach alleviates experiences of information overload and pressure. The focus group thus took concepts that were discussed theoretically during the delphi study, and examined whether 'real' experiences concur or contrast with these concepts. Notably, delphi study participants largely perceived that a slow approach to information was impractical and irrelevant, and the focus group aimed to explore these and related assertions. An additional aim of the focus group was to encourage its participants to reflect upon slow principles and values in their everyday lives, to describe first-hand their experiences of overload, and to consider the relevance of information in these areas. The focus group developed both individual and collective understanding of what being 'slow' means, and their discussion gave rise to two key ideas: '*being slow is not being fast, and being slow is being aware*' (Poirier, 2012, p. 252).

Culminating in her depiction of the informational balance model (see Figure 1 below), Poirier observes that there is a desire for informational balance in both theory and practice. The background area of the model represents the experiential and pervasive influence of information in everyday life (A), while the central area represents possible examples of the information practices of an individual (E). A boundary ring encircles the individual and their information practices, representing a *temporal buffer zone* via which control of information inputs and outputs is maintained (D). Information flow is illustrated by the large arrows: it may be pulled or pushed inward to fulfil a need as in many existing models, or for leisurely, random, or undirected pursuits (B), and it may also be pulled or pushed toward the centre as a result of institutional and social pressures. Information simultaneously flows outward as a result of the practices that occur within the boundary ring, as represented by arrow (C). A premise of the model is that the individual strives, consciously or unconsciously, to attain informational balance on a daily basis. When practices within the boundary ring maintain a regulated flow of information, informational balance is said to exist.

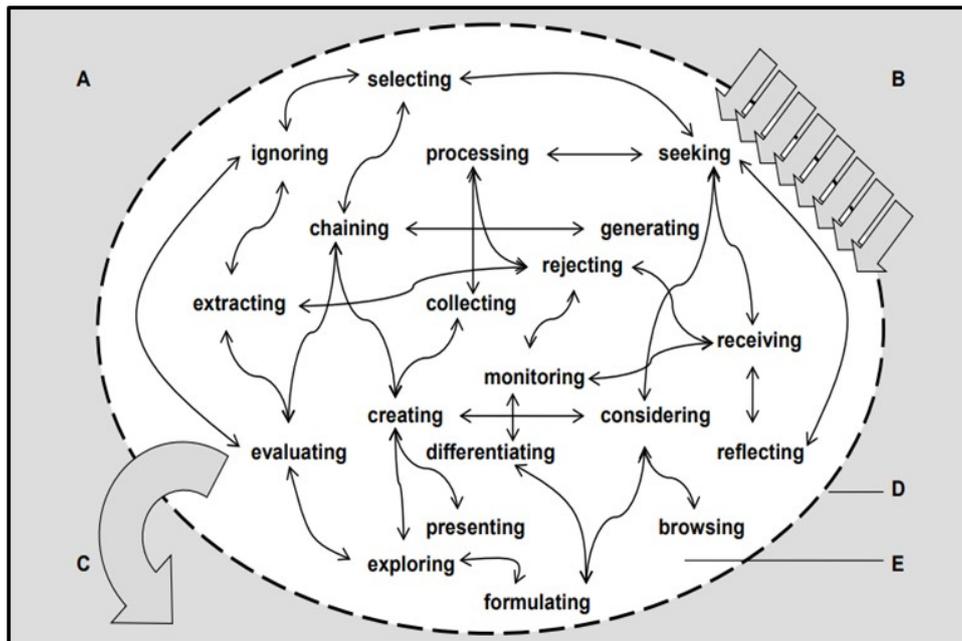


Figure 1. Poirier's informational balance model (Poirier, 2012).

Further research on informational balance

Two publications emanating from Poirier's thesis, written in collaboration with her supervisor Lyn Robinson, elaborate her contribution further: 'Informational balance: slow principles in the theory and practice of information behaviour' (Poirier and Robinson, 2014a) and 'Slow delphi: An investigation into information behaviour and the slow movement' (Poirier and Robinson, 2014b). In the former, Poirier and Robinson suggest that a slow approach allows theory to be more realistic by encompassing a wider range of practices than those typically included within most established information seeking models, particularly practices relating to experiential and temporal factors, while in the latter, they emphasise the applicability of a slow approach within research into information behaviours, practices and provision. They suggest that '*tempo is a significant, and understudied factor in information seeking [which] may act as a stimulus for further consideration of time as a crucial element for conceptualizing information behaviour*' and that an additional major contribution of a slow perspective is more '*critical consideration of the impacts of scale and speed on information provision*' (Poirier and Robinson, 2014b, p. 95).

The construct of informational balance has furthermore been taken up by a number of additional information scientists. David Bawden and Lynn Robinson (2020a, 2020b, 2019, 2016) and Tim Gorichanaz (2017), for example, suggest that Poirier's construct is one of the few that explicitly includes elements such as *considering* and *reflecting* that pertain to the development of higher-order understanding. Tibor Koltay (2017a; 2017b) and Konstantina Martzoukou and Ellam Abdi (2017) underscore that a slow approach provides a framework for the making of balanced and mindful choices appropriate to a given situation via the creation of sufficient space and time to do so. Ryan Burton and Kevyn Collins-Thompson (2016) draw upon the construct in order to develop insight into how slow information systems may be built and whether individuals may be willing to utilise such systems. Correspondingly, Melanie Feinberg (2017) contends that the slow reading of databases, as a distinct, separate activity from retrieving and reading the documents that databases contain, encourages '*awareness, reflection, and control over information systems*' (p. 336). Recently, Kiersten Latham, Jenna Hartel and Tim Gorichanaz (2020) invoke Poirier's construct of informational balance as being allied with contemplative interests and with deep and profound aims such as wisdom.

Conclusion

In shining a light on informational balance, this paper aspires to lay the groundwork for fresh elaboration of the construct and for future innovative research in this area. Information equilibrium and digital balance and equilibrium, are related constructs that have yet to be expanded in a comparable fashion that may also benefit from further in-depth empirical research. Additionally, meriting further attention are the various implicit and explicit ways in which a concern with balance and the requirement therefore are central to the field.

About the author

Hugh Samson is a Ph.D. student within the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. He received his Master of Information from the University of Toronto, Canada. His research explores the integration of contemplative initiatives, programs, services, spaces and technologies, or contemplative infrastructure, within information environments. He can be contacted at hsamson5@uwo.ca

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