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Abstract: The objective of the paper is to analyse the information (communication) process of fiction in order to increase our understanding of the different actors and factors involved in information processing. The methodology is that of the grounded theory, where previous studies of information process and fiction content representation are compared with the results of an empirical study in which library patrons and library professionals were asked to index and abstract five different kinds of novels.

1. Introduction

The mechanical model of information transfer was defined during the 1940’s for electronic communication tools, especially for the telephone (Shannon & Weaver 1975, p.7 and 33-34). In that model the communication was seen as a one-way process, i.e. the message delivered from the transmitter to the receiver should be as similar as possible.

Although this model is still widely used as our common perception of the information process, it has been criticized as being too simplistic. (See e.g. Foskett 1996, 5-7.) Eco has defined this as the model of the elementary structure of communication, since it describes only the physical stream of the communication and does not take into consideration the actual transition of meanings and the different kinds of interpretations that can take place in a communication between two or several persons. (Eco 1977, 32-33.)

In addition to the physical information transfer process, one can discern a parallel cognitive process (the actual communication process), where the knowledge of the actors is transmitted within the processed information and thus the sender tries to influence how the receiver perceives the information and vice versa (Järvelin 1995, 4-5). The model of the elementary structure of communication lacks also other crucial aspects of human information transfer and processing, for example the context and its effect on the communication as well as the effect of feedback during the communication (see e.g. Kovala 2001, p. 11, Riessman 1993, p.14).

2. Theoretical Approach, Research Questions, Data and Methods

The basic theoretical approach used in this study was qualitative, specifically the use of the grounded theory approach (see. e.g. Strauss & Corbin 1990). In the analysis of the obtained empirical material, both qualitative (mainly content analysis) and quantitative methods (mainly statistics) were used. This so-called triangulative approach was chosen to confirm the findings of the study (see e.g. Strauss & Corbin 1990, 18-19). The analysis of the indexing was carried out mainly with the aid of statistical and mathematical methods (see Saarti 2002), the
analysis of the abstracts predominantly with the aid of content analysis (see Saarti 2000).

Five novels from different genre categories were chosen for the experiment. A total of 30 people were chosen as indexers and abstractors for these novels. They were selected from five different Finnish public libraries: three patrons as well as three library professionals from each library. In order to ensure the comparison between different test subjects, they were all required to read the same novels. Then they were invited as a group for a discussion and asked to complete a questionnaire. In the group session, they all wrote abstracts and indexed the above novels. The indexing was done with Kaunokki - the Finnish thesaurus of fiction (see Saarti, 1999), the use of which was demonstrated to the test subjects.

The results from the analysis of the content description were analysed together with the results derived from the previous studies of the fiction knowledge organisation (see e.g. Beghtol 1994, Pejtersen & Austin 1983 and 1984), as well as with the analysis of the fiction communication (see chapter 3). The comparison was done in order to analyse the effect of the fiction information process on the knowledge organization of fiction.

3. Information Process of Fiction and its Main Actors

The main participants in the information process of fiction are: the work of art, its creator (i.e. the writer), the reader and the social-historical environment where the publishing and reception takes place (see fig. 1).

Due to the nature of fictional works, the reception of the work of art cannot be considered as complete, unless all of the above mentioned participants are involved in the process. The role of the writer is to write works of art – novels, short stories, poems, plays etc. – that are to be published. The role of the work of art is to be a medium by which the artist can communicate with his/her audience. Also the work of art has its own, autonomous life: after the book has been published, the writer’s only subsequent role as a readers, i.e. an interpreter of the work.

The role of the reader is that of the interpreter of a work of art. The interpretation as well as the creation of a work of art takes place in a social-historical context that defines the language used and its means of artistic expression. Without this common language, no communication between readers and writers would occur.

Fictional communication is also typically bi-faceted. On one hand it consists of factual meanings, i.e. references to actual happenings, historical and geographical facts etc (see e.g. Ranta 1991, 20-23) and on the other, it has an aesthetic function and is thus based on the individual interpretation and reception of the work of art.
4. The effect of the Fiction Information Process on the Actual Content Description

The content analysis of the abstracts revealed that about 75% of the 3206 different elements found in the abstracts described factual aspects of the novels (e.g. themes, settings, characters). Other categories (and their percentages) were: describing the novel structure (11.9%); describing the subjective reading experiences (5.5%); describing the novel historical setting (0.9%); references to the author (1.6%), and criticism and evaluation of the novel (5.2%) (see also Saarti 2000).
On the other hand the statistical facet analysis of the keywords used showed, that about half of the keywords used described thematic aspects of the novels. (The thirty test persons in this study made use of a total of 632 different keywords in indexing the five novels.) The next most popular category, used by about 20 %, described characters in the novels. Keywords describing settings and genres were both present at a rate of about 10 %. The least frequently used keywords were in the categories of time (5 %) and others (1 %, e.g. classics, translations) (see also Saarti 1999).

Fig 2. A broad model for a search and retrieval system for fiction (Saarti 2000, p.219).
Thus one can draw the conclusion that all aspects of the fictional communication process are present also in the actual content description of the novels. However, as found in this study, it is also quite evident that the most important focus is on the actual content of the novels – the other aspects have only a minor and supporting role.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Although the corpus of this study was limited, certain conclusions can be drawn. Different readers can be seen to use radically different elements when they are describing a novel's contents and the aesthetic experience of reading it. Also all the important participants of the information process of fiction are found in the abstracts, i.e. work, author, reader and the cultural-historical context. The description of fiction’s totality (its aboutness) must include the entire process of fiction and its reception, not only the texts and their contents. On the other hand, these latter two aspects can be seen as the most crucial factors in content representation of fiction. Furthermore there is already some evidence (e.g. from the internet bookstores) that also subjective aspects are important in fiction information systems. This, of course, is one topic that needs further study.

One clear result of studies on indexing and abstracting of fictional works is the impact that the interpretation of the work of art and the context of its reception have on the content description of the works. This could also be clearly noted in this study when analysing the abstracts that were produced. These interpretative and contextual aspects of content description are a subject for further study, not only in fictional works but also in scientific material.

It is apparent that fiction search and retrieval systems have to be multifaceted in order to meet the varying needs of different users. With the aid of this kind of system (see fig. 2.), one can document holistically the different aspects of the meaning of fiction, i.e. what the fiction is about. The building of these kinds of systems has started, but there is still much work to be done.

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References


