

## Review Article

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# Studies on Information Users and Non-Users: An Alternative Proposal

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**Abstract:** Studies on non-users are often neglected in the area of information. Such research studies face challenges to obtain diagnostics. This article defends the realization of studies comprehending both information users and non-users, approaching different focuses and conceptions. The theoretical frameworks approached contributions and limitations of these concepts. The term “information non-user” can be employed to approach subjects ignored or out of interest in the area of information. Public policies on information, education, and culture seek to convert such non-users into users, as they promote the “socially” valued culture. However, mediating institutions may also acknowledge the culture of non-users and appreciate their informational needs and situations in context. Considering the studies on users and non-users bring benefits for the field and the society, working with a wide, inclusive conception. Yet, such studies may not include other processes, such as information reading and appropriation in certain contexts, or even disregard informational behaviors and practices in everyday life. It is important to reflect on epistemological and theoretical–methodological choices to perform such studies. These decisions reflect, politically and ethically, a worldview from professors, researchers, and professionals in the field of information, which can give voice and a leading role for such, while rendering others silent and invisible.

**Keywords:** information user, information non-user, information user studies, public, non-public

## 1 Introduction

Studies concerning non-users are often neglected or omitted due to a greater need for work, time, and/or resources (Brunskill & Hanneke, 2021), as they present a challenge to approach a significant slice of the population (Borteye, Atiso, & Knust, 2018; Schlichter & Pemberton, 1992), which increases difficulty in obtaining diagnostics (Brunskill & Hanneke, 2021).

This research defends the possibility of studies to comprehend the subject/information relation, considering both information users and non-users. Analyses take place featuring different focuses and conceptions on these subjects and their contributions and implications for professional performance and research on information, thus aiming to broadening epistemological, ethical, and political glances in the field of information user studies.

The field of information user studies, concerning information needs and information-seeking studies, is consolidated in areas such as library and information science, and documentation (hereinafter referred to as “area of information”). One investigates therein, among other aspects, the needs and processes of seeking, using, and appropriating information. Nevertheless, other expressions, guided by different theoretical views, have been employed on certain occasions representing the field, or guiding the action therein, as is the case of information behavior, or information practice.

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Information models productively showed their theoretical and practical development in the field, featuring investigations and actions in the professional ambit guided by the information user construct. Yet, the concept presents a trajectory widely approached in the literature of the area of information, directed toward characterizing certain subjects in its relation with given means and informational contexts.

Facing the allegedly universalizing path, one must acknowledge that the concept of information user, as any other concept with scientific aspirations, features epistemological fundamentals presenting ethical and political implications. One should, hence, reflect not only on the contributions of this concept, but also on its epistemic limitations, especially when it is shown under the sign of assuming the totality of a community's subjects.

Indeed, this work proposes to adopt the concept of information non-user as a counterpoint or complement to this field of studies, potentially broadening the comprehension on subject/information relation. In this perspective, the expression “non-user” refers to subjects who are, in different ways, ignored or out of reach for the interest of the field. The introduction of this concept seeks to contribute to the promotion of a broader reflection, involving, among other aspects, further means to promote acting roles.

There is, hence, the search for an alternative for markedly discriminatory and excluding actions. Such external actions are found when one evokes, for instance, difficulties or impossibilities to search, use, and/or appropriate information. Such obstacles can be directed to the subjects in the form of institutional inadequacy or when there is some sort of prejudice concerning their physical or mental condition, gender, origin, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, among other factors.

Finally, this article defends and criticizes the possibility of studies comprehending both information users and non-users. Integrating this approach, there is the argument of the possibility to receptively welcome users, their behaviors, and their practices. Moreover, there is the understanding that, performing “information user and non-user studies,” there is the possibility of conducting teaching, research, and professional actions from research studies that effectively contemplate the information/community relation.

## 2 Methodology

The literature on focuses and conceptions of information users and non-users were reviewed, approaching theoretical references on contributions and limitations of these concepts.

The review of the literature on focuses and conceptions of information user (cf. Section 3) counted on 16 publications of the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology (ARIST), which approached themes such as informational need, seeking, use, behavior, and practice. The analyses were carried out with the support of studies by González-Teruel (2017) and Rabello (2013).

The review of focuses and conception of information non-users, including the concept of non-public (Amado, 2017; Flusser, 1980; Jeanson, 1973) (cf. Section 5), was based on publications selected by Rocha and Rabello (2022). A reverse search was conducted from references by Silvestre Estela (2019), reaching 36 publications. An additional group of 39 documents was retrieved seeking publications from 2017 to 2022, using the search words “non-user” and “nonuser” in sources such as SciVerse Scopus (3), Web of Science – WoS (3), Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (10), *Base de Dados Referenciais de Artigos de Periódicos em Ciência da Informação* (4), *Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações* (4), and Google Scholar (18). After reanalyzing the 76 documents, the *corpus* was outlined with 44 publications. This was achieved by suppressing repeated documents and those with little relevance to the conceptual fundament for the terms in question.

Reflections on contributions and limitations of the concept of information user (Section 4) were based on a framework contemplating these premises: (a) Assumptions concerning the institutionalized information system (Almeida Junior, & Rabello, 2022; Belkin, 1978; Brookes, 1980; Frohmann, 2007; Shannon & Weaver, 1975) and (b) Assumptions concerning society (Almeida Junior, 2015; Bourdieu, 1989; Freire, 1979; Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2020; Köptcke, 2003, 2005; Rabello, 2022; Stengers, 2005; Tomás, 2010).

In turn, reflections on contributions and limitations of the concept of information non-user (Section 6) were based on studies considering given preconditions of the subjects and possibilities of (re)adjustments of these new conditions (Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2020; Silva & Bernardino, 2015). This section also features discussions on the relation between theoretical research and professional actions, considering studies that welcome subjects and their practices (Rabello, 2021).

### 3 Focuses and Conceptions of Information User

Investigations on the path of information user studies find in ARIST an invaluable source for research. ARIST, created in 1965 by the American Documentation Institute – currently the Association for Information Science and Technology – and by the National Science Foundation, was discontinued in 2011, but remains a retrospective source for the area of information. During its publishing period, ARIST published at least 16 reviews of the literature, approaching, specifically, topics such as information need, seeking, use, behavior, and practice.

Titles reflect on predominant theoretical perspectives in each time of publication. In 1966 and 1967, reviews were guided by the need and use of information in scientific communities. Between 1966 and 1990, reviews focused on general aspects of science and technology in information systems and their users. In 2001, 2006, and 2009, reviews included the term “informational behavior” in their titles, while the word “context” was added, complementarily, only in 2007. The expression “information practice” can be found only in the last title of the series, in the 2010 review.

In these publications, there is the possibility to analyze focuses and conceptions of user from the predominance of informational paradigms (Capurro, 2007), also expressed in terms of models (Rabello, 2013) or theoretical focuses (González-Teruel, 2017).

The physical (or objective) model is based on the idea that the information system is the means by which messages are transmitted and intermediated, and that users are passive toward it. In turn, the cognitive (or subjective) model values the user as an individual who attributes meaning to the information, with a cognitive action taking place in isolation, but depending on its relation with the system. The social (or pragmatic) model goes beyond the notion of system and use of information, taking place in a network mediation and interaction context, in behaviors and practices by means of which information is appropriated.

González-Teruel (2017) investigated the field of information user studies and found “greater rigor” and “deep reflection” in the constructivist–cognitive focus, centered on the individual, and, in a relative manner, on their surroundings as a conditioner for seeking information. However, this focus, according to the author, has not been able to approach the practical implications of the research results on the topic. She found that new focuses emphasize the importance of the social aspect, but the social dimension in the field lacks bases for a more productive dialogue with users.

González-Teruel (2017) obtained the aforementioned diagnostic from comparing the “constructivist–cognitive focus” with contributions from authors approaching “seek for information in the ambit of everyday life” (Chatman, 1996; McKenzie, 2003; Savolainen, 1995; Taylor, 1991; Talja, Keso, & Pietilainen, 1999, among others), or who comprised what she referred to as “alternative theoretical focus” (Carey, Mckechnie, & Mckenzie, 2002; Davenport, 2010; Julien, 1999a,b; McKenzie, 2003; Olsson, 2005, 2012, 2009; Tuominen, 1997).

The idea of emphasis – whether in the working of the system, or the constructivist–cognitive dimension, or the social dimension – presupposes the coexistence of models, although one model may prevail, in space and time, over another or others (Rabello, 2013). The aforementioned study helps to comprehend the setting of focuses and conceptions of information users registered in ARIST reviews from the late 1960s to the 2000s.

In the reviews from 1966 to 1990 (Allen, 1969; Crane, 1971; Crawford, 1978; Hewins, 1990; Herner & Herner, 1967; Lipetz, 1970; Lin & Garvey, 1972; Martyn, 1974; Menzel, 1966; Paisley, 1968), there is a focus on the relation between the professional and the information system user, especially in the scene of science and technology. The prevailing conception of user is adherent to the physical model of information. Studies on use and users are performed aiming to improve the system and its related products and services.

During the abovementioned period, Crawford's (1978) review differed from the prevailing model. It features the conception of user aligned with the cognitive model of information. This model distinction was found more clearly in reviews by Dervin and Nilan (1986) and Hewins (1990), produced in sequence. Between these two reviews, Dervin and Nilan's differed as it approached studies including the relation between professional focuses and those of everyday life.

This relation of focuses became better visualized from the early 2000s, whose reviews started to focus on the social model of information. The reviews from that decade highlighted two important issues: the adoption of the term "information behavior" to name a perspective, the field of study itself; and the consideration of the social context as a guiding element.

Literature reviews carried out in this period present a particular highlight as they approach issues that go beyond the relation of subjects with the information system. Studies start to consider the interaction of users in social network contexts and in the web. Previously, only Herner and Herner's (1967) review had focused on social networks, when they approached the behavior of researchers in science and technology in the context of "invisible colleges."

Authors such as Pettigrew, Fidel, and Bruce (2001) agree with the change of focus found in the title of ARIST's review. This change became a constant in later publications, in 2006, 2007, and 2009. They also endorsed studies proposing a change in the name of the field, due to the academic community's acceptance of the term "information behavior." Furthermore, they highlight the importance of multifaceted approaches that consider the sociocultural and sociolinguistic context, aiming to establish dialogues with social sciences.

Case (2006) offers a broad definition for information behavior, involving the interaction of individuals with relevant information sources, including the flow, transfer, and sharing of information, in addition to legitimizing and justifying informational values in interpersonal relations, in constructivist and constructional approaches. The review presents the exercise of categorizing information users based on their occupation, position, and social and demographic aspects.

Courtright (2007) expands the concept of user in research studies exploring the interaction and intervention shared by individuals in the process of seeking information. This author also agrees with Cool's (2001) view that the context is a structure in communicative processes. The term "context" can be synonymous with other words such as situation, ambit, world of information, world of life, field of information and scene, and it is fundamental to consider information practices in everyday life.

Fisher and Julien (2009) examine research studies on information practices in everyday life, including studies on youth and gender, highlighting the crucial role of context as a variable in investigations on the dissemination of information in systems. The review points to the growing importance of context and situations in academia for the study of motivation and process of seeking information on relevant topics, such as technological changes, health, interpersonal communication, and social networks.

The review by Caidi, Allard, and Quirke (2010) differs from other ARIST reviews as it focuses on the term "practices" and on a specific group: immigrants. ARIST reviews since 1990 already included studies on need, seeking, and use of information, and, since 2001, they started to consider information behavior and information practice. The increase of studies on informational practices is evidenced in Courtright's (2007) review, and it continued until the end of the 2000s.

As ARIST reviews from the 2000s suggest, there is controversy surrounding the naming of the field or in relation with the direction of the studies, reaching perspectives in research areas and/or professional actions. Wilson (1999; 2000) defends information behavior in context, while Savolainen (2008) defends everyday information practices.

González-Teruel understands that a nominalist approach, seeking to overlay different conceptual tags, can limit the reflection on effective implications in the field, as such positions tend not to differ substantially in ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, nor in clarity concerning the exposition of practical implications and their results (González-Teruel, 2017).

Nevertheless, there is the understanding that perspectives are not ontologically and epistemologically neutral, and researchers at times are stuck to their own discursive constructions. Facing such arguments, what comes to surface is that information behavior and information practice act as "umbrella concepts," with research studies orbiting each of those perspectives, albeit with diverse discursive formulations (Savolainen, 2007).

Information behavior studies have been consolidating and receiving wide acceptance. Part of the criticisms directed to this perspective stems from its association with behaviorism in psychology (González-Teruel, 2017). In defense of the information practice, there is the comprehension that, with this perspective, it would be possible to study them considering social and cultural aspects (Savolainen, 2007). The debate between Wilson and Savolainen offers more information on this controversy (The Behaviour/Practice Debate, 2009). The special issue "Human Informative Behavior" of the journal *Informatio* presents an overview of studies on the use, behavior, and informational practice in various regions (*Informatio*, 2023).

Throughout ARIST reviews, one can notice the social model of information advanced in the comprehension of the user. At first, the focus on science and technology neglected the seeking and use of information by other professionals and subjects in everyday life.

The idea of context, in studies on informational behavior, may benefit from the following concept: "The context of an actor's information behavior consists of elements such as environment, task, actor-source relationship, time, etc. that are relevant to the behavior during the course of interaction and vary based on magnitude, dynamism, patterns and combinations, and that appear differently to the actor than to others, who make an in-group/out-group differentiation of these elements depending on their individual and shared identities." (Agarwal, 2018, p. 128).

Widening the notion of context, one can explore behaviors and practices beyond the cognitive dimension of the user in their relation with the system. This development can be exemplified by studies analyzing the interaction and intervention of subjects in social networks and in the web, as well as in other means of everyday life.

One should notice the lack of emphasis, in ARIST reviews, on theoretical studies on the user and social classes, although the publications reported on investigations concerning the broadening of scope of the context and the relation of subjects with information. Yet, one may observe that Case's (2006) review registered studies on the invisibility of social groups, focused on vulnerable information users, such as the poor, the homeless, the elderly, and women, among others.

## 4 Contributions and Limitations of the "Information User" Concept

"Information user" names the field of studies. The presupposed subject, in a traditional dimension, is one who, ultimately, utilizes information mediated by a professional, acting in a given institution. In this setting, subjects can be studied considering at least two assumptions, concerning: 1) the institutionalized information system and 2) society.

The assumptions concerning the institutionalized information system require resuming characteristics approached in Section 3, as well as considering aspects of message transmission dynamics (Shannon & Weaver, 1975); conceptions of information in the cognitive perspective (Belkin, 1978; Brookes, 1980); criticisms of the "mentalist" model, which prescribes the manifestation of information in the individual as something immaterial, abstract, and uniform (Frohmann, 2007); and the criticism of the lack of autonomy of the user in need of adapting to the information retrieval system structure (Almeida Junior & Rabello, 2022).

These assumptions concern the existence of real or effective users, as well as potential ones. Both present a given need for information. The real user is the one who effectively utilizes the system and its information services and products. The potential user is the one who may potentially make such use, but needs to be reached or provoked by the professional in order for the information to be mediated and utilized.

The user's need for information mobilizes the education in the area of information, as well as research studies and/or professional actions in the field. The physical model, based on authors such as Shannon and Weaver (1975), among others, and the cognitive model of information, based on authors such as Belkin (1978) and Brookes (1980), among others, present the assumption of interaction with the system in the subject/information relation, but do not consider the variables of social context. After placing such models in the ambit of academic production on information use and user (Section 3), it is appropriate to conceptualize them, considering the identified characteristics.

The physical model emphasizes the user/information relation, featuring the user's passive interaction, in the condition of receiver, along with the information retrieval system. In a positivistic and functionalist

perspective, the information user is the fundamental piece of the system, as the user is the one featuring the function of receiving the transmitted message in an ideally efficient and effective manner, with minimal noise. Research studies and actions performed in this model understand that the semantic dimension of information is maintained, since its production until its entrance in the system, as well as during the processing and exit of the message toward the receiver.

The cognitive model highlights the user's interaction in the development and improvement of the information system. In a constructivist–cognitive focus, the user is studied in the condition of an individual whose cognition can be comprehended and mapped. The process of filling informational gaps to meet the user's needs involves the study of mental processes. One seeks to take advantage of possible semantic appropriations of information and the attributions of meaning in order to anticipate and control the interaction between subject and information, so as to provide customized information by means of the system.

In this traditional setting, the field of information user studies considers the information professional's mediating action in a formal institution, also called information unit. This assumption directs the characteristics comprising the information system, directing the information professional's actions, as well as interfering in the behavior and practices of the information user, a subject who will, ideally, interact with the institutionalized system.

In this direction, anticipating, controlling, and meeting the information user's needs are assumptions to be considered in the studies of users. There is the intention of meeting the needs by means of products and services planned and guided by allegedly predictive policies. In this context, the studies of users, in theory, fulfill the role of diagnostic survey for such prediction.

The user should adapt to the structure of the information system. The actions of study and education of the users fulfill this function. They prospect, define, and teach those capable of utilizing tools intermediating previously selected, treated, and organized sources and resources, finally available to seek, access, and retrieve information, filling the gap in the user's need.

One should observe that the physical model presents the limitation of not effectively considering the information user, conceived as part of the retrieval system itself, in the condition of being the recipient of the messages. On the other hand, the cognitive model presents the limitation of considering the information user an isolated individual, socially decontextualized. The information to be controlled, in this case, is present in the individual's minds as something immaterial, abstract, and uniform (Frohmann, 2007).

One of these assumptions – regarding the physical and cognitive models – concerns their epistemic limitations, which do not anticipate the subjects' acting roles in society. In both models, the information system presupposes, ultimately, the registry of the communicated and gathered content for the purpose of anticipation, control, and meeting the user's need. This subject needs to adapt to the structure of the system or its products and services and, thus, needs to adapt to the information professional's commands (Almeida Junior, & Rabello, 2022).

These limitations find an alternative in the social model. This framing receives, in addition to the information users, subjects belonging to unprivileged classes. They possess a capacity to resist oppressing discourses by means of access to information. These subjects connect and build identity links in complex social relations, molded by socio-informative and innovative structures (Rendón-Rojas & García Cervantes, 2012).

Information mediation, in the ambit of the social model of information, contributes to the reflection on the aforementioned acting roles. In this process, subjects, use, reading, and appropriation of information can be studied in formally institutionalized information units (Almeida Junior, 2015), or, complementarily, in information entities not formally institutionalized (Rendón-Rojas & García Cervantes, 2012), as one can observe in the case of social networks, digital platforms, popular associations, community museums and libraries, private collections, home context, and other examples.

The assumption concerning society requires considering aspects of social invisibility (Tomás, 2010); of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1989); of the action of the dominant class (Freire, 1979); partial and momentary satisfaction of the user's need for information, as well as provoking conflicts in subjects so as to generate new needs (Almeida Junior, 2015); the dimensions of inequality and invisibility of subjects in social classes (Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2020); difficulties in assessing and considering the use made by the public in the institutional

context (Köptcke, 2003, 2005); and the “cosmopolitical proposal” (Stengers, 2005) as a subsidy for information mediation “*in the presence of...*” (Rabello, 2022).

The social model tends to conceive the information user as a subject seeking, using, and appropriating information in context, whether in their professional life setting, or in everyday life. In this model, the system, in formally institutionalized information units, is no longer central or essential, as it then considers, complementarily, the interaction and intervention of subjects in other informational entities and spaces.

The user scope broadness provided by the social model of information allows thinking ethical and political implications that the concept, epistemologically, generates in the area of information. When situated in terms of social inequality and invisibility, the information user construct can be analyzed, for instance, in terms of class privilege.

Social invisibility is connected to social exclusion, which is amply studied in social sciences, highlighting topics regarding marginalized groups, such as prostitutes, drug users, prisoners, people with disabilities, immigrants, refugees, housekeepers, among others. These individuals and their historic perspectives are often ignored or unknown. As a result, those rendered invisible are faced with the impossibility of participating in public life. Invisibility can be a “source of sadness” for vulnerable groups, or a “subversion mode,” as in the case of hacker activists (Tomás, 2010).

Social inequality can be studied from concepts corresponding to Bourdieu’s *habitus*, the construct where matters on symbolic power operate concerning the dispositions toward behavior and perception of the world. This perspective generates multidimensional relations of social fields, found with the articulation of types of capital. These are characterized by the fact that they can be accumulated and converted, ultimately, in symbolic power. The types of capital of interest for this reflection are economic and cultural capitals, whose gathering helps to comprehend situations of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1989).

Economic capital is measured in material terms, and those who hold it try to impose their structure on other fields. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is not always visible, as it may come from so-called domestic transmissions, which add to the investment of added time, yet related to monetary gain and investment, which may be presented in three forms: in incorporated state, i.e. in the form of durable dispositions of the organism; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and, finally, in institutionalized state, in the form of diplomas (Bourdieu, 1989).

In an analysis comprehending the fields of education and culture, the philosopher Paulo Freire argues that every educational practice presupposes a given conception on human nature and the world. Depending on the worldview found in the relation between the educator and the pupil, the educator’s action can be considered “naïve” or “critical” (Freire, 1979).

Freire exposes the conception of educators when they are aligned with the interests or worldview of the dominant class. In this case, the political action is guided by the ideology of technical neutrality. Educational practice, of a technicist nature, is decontextualized from sociocultural reality. Political and social implications, tensions, and conflicts are reduced to mere linguistic matters. As a result, pupils become “naïve” reproducers of words or mere recipients for the content to be “fed.”

This form of education operates under the promise that the dominated class will return to a structure considered “healthy” from which it was removed. In this perspective, the dominated class is seen as comprised by “marginal” beings in relation with something. Educators act as “humanitarian counselors” and “givers” of new realities, holding the key to the return of those marginalized to the center. This approach conceives the future as a repetition of the present or as a pre-determined fate, offering very little room for the hope of freedom (Freire, 1979).

Both in the perspective of internalizing a “socially” accepted culture (Bourdieu, 1989), and in the view of a merely naïve “storage” of contents (Freire, 1979), there is an assumption that the subject should adapt to an imposed reality. A social class is imposed onto another as it establishes an expected behavioral pattern. In this context, practices can be accepted, tolerated, or rejected, depending on the degree of submission to such actions (Freire, 1979). This analogy can be expanded as one thinks of the information user as someone submissive, such as the pupil.

The concept of information user performs an important role as it guides attitudes concerning behavior and world perception. As a theoretical construct that can approach questions of invisibility and social

inequality, the notion of information user influences research, education, and professional practice in the area of information, with the intent to represent individuals of one or more communities to be met. This is because the ideal information user profile tends to be considered a theoretical imperative that synthesizes material and symbolic attributes of middle and higher classes. The traditional perspective of information mediation and user studies works with the expectation of transforming the potential user into a real one, as they feature attributes – some economic and/or cultural capital, for instance – for such a change of category (Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2020).

Such previous attributes, in terms of cultural capital, may manifest themselves as literacy, in their own language or in foreign ones, habit or familiarity with reading, appreciation of a given language, or “socially” accepted aesthetic manifestation. Furthermore, the subject may hold educational, scientific, technical, and technological competences. Such a profile tends to, albeit implicitly, provide the basis and guidance for the development of political actions and services in information units.

The diagnostic for decision-making in information units – planning and executing information and culture mediation policies – is performed by means of, for instance, assessing work based on studies on use and users. Studies on experience assessment in visits to museums have pointed toward the difficulty of obtaining diagnostics, especially due to the asymmetry in the process. The separation between subject (observer/evaluator) and object (observed users) prevents or hinders dialogical assessment practices (Köptcke, 2003).

Moreover, there is the admission of users in the form of heterogeneous groups, as long as they can be disciplined. This idealization brings about unwanted or tolerated uses. It allows us to think the metaphor of information users – museum visitors – as “civilized,” “barbarians,” or “captives” (Köptcke, 2005). The idea of real or ideal users allows one to categorize them as a composite of good and dignified groups, separating unwanted ones. Indeed, symbolic violence stems, among other aspects, from the prescription of “exemplary” behaviors. There is a predicted hierarchy of uses and possible subjects in this conduct (Köptcke, 2005).

In order to comprehend and contribute with a reflection on the concept of information user, one must consider its epistemological fundamentals and the ethical and political implications involved. It is not enough to acknowledge the contributions of this concept; it is equally important to reflect on its epistemic limitations. When presenting it as a means to assume a certain universality of subjects of a community – however good the intentions may be – there is the risk of ignoring some and considering others as actors.

The difficult task of considering the implications of those involved in the mediation process (Rabello, 2022) presents a potential to contribute with a reflection on subjects of interest for the field of information user studies. Based on Stengers’ (2005) “cosmopolitical proposal” – which presents as its theme the implications and responsibilities in scientific making – there is the possibility of thinking, as an alternative, an acting “*in the presence of...*”. Otherness, in this case, becomes a variable for the respect of subjects in a community, considering their singularities.

The preoccupation involves a posture by which the researcher – as an expert, capable of reaching an authority’s conclusions such as “*and so*” – should slow down before “efficient” actions. This implies hesitating, suspending a technical and scientific action, or feeling uncomfortable facing such commands of authority. This is because the consequences of the act taking place, even with the best of intentions, may result in the involvement of baseness. Being “*in the presence of...*” toward the consequences results in having an idea that the effects of the acts can be pernicious.

Stengers’ thought invites deceleration, a teaching that may be loaned and extended to the field of information user studies. It can highlight the importance of avoiding, despite their good intentions, inconsequent actions, or perpetuating/deepening baseness, something which can translate in terms of social inequality and invisibility. In this direction, employing the concept of information user, as an encompassing category, can become the cause of actions of this nature. That is because, when one does not pay careful attention, one runs the risk of overlooking ethical and political implications brought about by the epistemological perspective on which the concept is based.

Nevertheless, the “information user” concept keeps its relevance for the field. It remains representative of subjects comprising privileged publics, such as those from colleges and universities, or specialized institutions, or others. The openness to study the use of information in context and in the ambit of everyday life – from the perspectives of informational practice and behavior – also reinforces the relevance of the concept.



Even so, one should observe the existence of subjects who, in different manners, are ignored or out of reach of interest of the field of information user studies. If members of the community are not considered or attended to, the area of information will have to reconsider its limitations and enable itself to self-evaluate. The proposed deceleration has as its argumentative axis the need to widen the glance beyond subjects who are or should be of interest. In this sense, the concept of “non-user” acquires relevance for the area of information and introduces new challenges and reflections.

## 5 Focuses and Conceptions of Information Non-Users

The area of information – when it preponderantly considers formally institutionalized information systems and units – stems from the assumption that attending to the community, for each unit, should be guided by the institutional mission and its aims. With this fundament, the public is outlined by the information user studies, defining subjects that will become of interest for information mediation actions. This public is, hence, formed by real and potential information users, who, ultimately, should adapt to how the system works.

It is important to highlight that subjects can be framed in an intermediary or complementary zone to the concept of real or effective users, as is the case of the concept of “marginal users”, which corresponds to subjects utilizing information services and the system marginally or precariously (Blaylock & Arriol, 2021; Sridhar, 1994). Other conceptions name them “infrequent users” (Katz, 1974, as cited in Figueiredo, 1983). Furthermore, they are the so-called “passive users,” who make use of the space, for instance, of a library, for social meetings (Agustín-Lacruz & Saurin-Parra, 2020; Koerber, 2016).

The impossibility of subjects to adapt to the informational system implies fundamental epistemological and ontological challenges for the conception of a public for a given information unit. Those who, for some reason, comprise the segment with impossibility of utilizing cultural equipment and information systems are named “non-public” (Amado, 2017; Flusser, 1980; Jeanson, 1973), comprised of “non-users” (Rabello, 2021).

The ideas of public and non-public to the access of art, for instance, remount to the transition of medieval art, when it presented a religious–pedagogical function, toward renaissance art, viewed as an individual and economic good. Such transformation led to the isolation of the non-public concerning cultural objects, restricting the access and possibility of expression (Flusser, 1980).

The concept of non-public was introduced for the first time, with a systematic pretense, by Francis Jeanson, during the events of May 1968, in France. This conception arose as part of the debate on cultural politics in culture equipment and institutions, and it was used as a piece of argument in the *Déclaration de Villeurbanne* (Amado, 2017).

The abovementioned argumentation allowed the establishment of a distinction between the “cultivated” public and the non-public. The public was divided in “current” and “potential” publics. The “potential” public would only become “current” if there were “supplementary efforts,” such as facility of access and improvement in publicity. The non-public, in turn, would be formed by “non-cultivated” ones, who, despite cultural animation initiatives, remained excluded from the enjoyment of cultural creation (Jeanson, 1973).

Jeanson’s perspective is guided by the understanding that the non-public corresponds to a human immensity comprised of all who do not yet have any access, or any chance of soon accessing the cultural phenomena in the forms they continue to present in the near totality of the cases (Jeanson, 1973).

The non-public was divided by Jeanson (1973) into three categories. The first would be characterized by the lack of basic instruction in quantity and quality, resulting in economic and political exclusion. Instruction is valued by the “cultivated” elite. The second category would be influenced by the consuming society, leading to banal and easily commercialized cultural choices. The third and last category would be comprised of the young with intellectual education to become leaders, but who refuse to take that position to confront what they denounce.

The conception of non-public – which anticipates the conditions of the subjects that keep them from adapting to cultural equipment and information systems – prompts reflection on theoretical difficulties of the field of studies of users. They imply carrying out research on how to change the conditions and the approach of

the institutions and their professionals so as to attend to the subjects who can be, for instance, in a situation of social inequality and invisibility.

The concept “information user,” as a theoretical imperative, leads to the need for the field to slow down, in the sense of not committing (or keep committing) possible baseness, even if they are not performed deliberately. The concept of non-user makes room to approach this challenge. Facing this, the following question arises: how to transform the non-public into public; in other words: how to transform non-users into real or potential information users?

Seeking alternatives to answer this question, it became necessary to collect studies with a focus on the thematic of non-users. In this direction, there was the interest in knowing how the literature has been approaching this topic, placing in its horizon the assumption of the impossibility of adaptation of subjects to the information system. Keeping in view the recurrent interpretations found in the literature, focuses and conceptions of information non-users follow.

The studies here considered tend to define non-users as those who do not utilize the product provided by a given information unit (Bannwart & Minich, 2020; Blaylock & Arriol, 2021; Bangar & Panage, 2018; Cannon, 1990; Fernandes, 2012; Harris 2013; Jaikumar & Saravanan, 2018; McCarthy, 1994; McConnell, 2017; Sridhar, 1994; Suaiden, 1995; Silvestre Estela & Cunha, 2017; Shin, Jeon, & Lee, 2022; Ujo, 2021; Fujiwara, Lawton, & Mourato, 2019), also called “never-users” (Fernández-Ardèvol, Ferran-Ferrer, Nieto-Arroyo, & Fenoll, 2018), which makes it difficult to differentiate non-users from potential users (Brunskill & Hanneke, 2021).

Specifically, some researchers define non-users as individuals who do not make use of libraries, or information products or services, due to not knowing them, or due to not perceiving the environment and resorts offered as relevant, adequate, or accessible (Nasir, 1966; Figueiredo, 1978; Madden, 1979; Bryant, 1980; Baillargeon & Dufort, 1982; Kremer, 1984; Figueiredo, 1978, 1994; Gómez-Hernández, 1996; Ramlogan & Tedd, 2006; Toner, 2008; Cassidy, Martinez, & Shen, 2012; Silva & Sampaio, 2013; Borteye et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2020; Williment, 2020; Lizazi-Mbanga & Mapulanga, 2021).

There are, still, those who comprehend how people possess alternatives to satisfy their needs for information or who prefer to acquire their own reading materials (Katz, 1974, as cited in Figueiredo, 1983; McCarthy, 1994; McNicol, 2004; Toner, 2008).

Other scholars confirm, suggest, or defend the idea that a greater effort in the dissemination of information products and services may be enough to convert non-users or potential users into effective users (Baillargeon & Dufort, 1982; Borteye et al., 2018; Olorunfemi & Ipadeola, 2018; Suaiden, 1995; Toner, 2008). These subjects “[...] need the library most and all stimulating, persuading and marketing efforts of libraries should be concentrated on absolute non-users” (Nasir, 1966, p. 13).

In this direction, studies consider non-users – also called “ex-users” (Fernández-Ardèvol et al., 2018) or “factual non-users” (Consonni, 2010) – in the condition of subjects who, for instance, spend a period of time without utilizing the institutional ambient or their information products and services (Hernon & Pastine, 1977; Arias Coello & Simón Martín, 2008; Silvestre Estela, 2019). Indeed, there are those who conceive non-users and potential users as synonymous expressions (Fernandes & Cendón, 2021).

“Absolute non-users,” characterized by being devoid of information, can be differentiated from potential users, even in a different terminology. They were once called “involuntary non-users,” while potential ones were called “voluntary or willful non-users” (Slater, 1984; Sridhar, 1994). “These nonusers live in an information-rich society and yet voluntarily suffer from information malnutrition” (Sridhar, 1994, p. 4).

Even so, one must observe the existence of what Silva and Sampaio (2013, p. 135) referred to as a very thin line between non-users and potential users, as the change of category would depend on some form of stimulus or incentive. Hence, authors have been working with the hypothesis of transforming non-users into real users (Walmiki, Ramakrishnegowda, & Prithviraj, 2010), even if, at times, the non-user is conceived as a potential user (Cannon, 1990; McCarthy, 1994; Sridhar, 1994).

In addition to not utilizing an institutional space, or a product or service offered there, in order to conceptualize the non-user, we work with the perspective that there is some form of impossibility, even if momentarily, for subjects to adapt to the information system. In many occasions, the subject does not decide to be a non-user, once not using information is not related with simply a choice, but may represent a condition beyond their intention.

## 6 Contributions and Limitations of the Concept “Information Non-User”

### 6.1 Non-Public, Social Classes, and Institutional (In)Adequacies

The concept of non-public contributes for the comprehension that the non-user is not simply an individual who chooses not to utilize a given product or service in/from a given institution of information system. This concept may also represent a condition affecting a collective. There arises, hence, the understanding that this condition can be overcome or minimized by means of actions promoting forms of thinking and actions transcending limitations imposed by restrictive theoretical–practical approaches in relation with the conception of subjects.

The idea of non-public, comprised of non-users, allows one to think preconditions of subjects and possibilities of their (re)adaptation to new conditions. In this direction, at least two parts can be mobilized: 1) Composition of social classes and relation between social invisibility and inequality (Jeanson, 1973; Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2020; Souza, 2011) and 2) Inadequacy of institutions (Silva & Bernardino, 2015) and prejudices (Rabello, 2021).

The concept of non-public highlights the impossibility of part of the population to enjoy cultural goods. What is needed is more than the individual wish or adjustments in the institutions to allow access and appropriation of artistic or cultural manifestations. The non-public is an aftermath of limiting actions from information and culture institutions. Overcoming this condition requires changes, so as to guarantee the voice and active participation of the non-public in the cultural setting (Jeanson, 1973).

Changes of this nature give rise, for example, from a Freirean perspective, to the mobilization and use of generative words recognizable to a certain group. In this view, the technique is not neutral. It would be used for social transformation facing a “cultural action toward freedom” (Freire, 1979). The aim is to transcend the mechanistic approach of the alienated word, seeking, instead, a comprehension that allows one to name the world and to urge critical action.

In this sense, human action as praxis is one that creates and transforms the world and itself. It allows the practice and critical reflection to produce knowledge. By means of the dialogue between educators and pupils, they are conceived as subjects of knowledge belonging to a social reality. Praxis is presented as a means to purge the physical and mythical presence of the dominator. The key for this consists in not breaking with a theoretical and concrete context, i.e. not to confine theory and practice (Freire, 1979).

The non-public – as an expression of social invisibility and inequality – can be thought in the ambit of the “culture of silence” of a “silenced majority.” This is the culture in which one class dominates another, keeping it from being authentic, forbidding it to “have a voice,” to “say the word.” Freire says that, without serious, responsible knowledge of how these populations transform, in their practice, their weakness into strength, a valid communication with them is impossible; without this knowledge, what we do is to “invade them” (Freire, 1979).

With the “invasion,” as Freire says, it may not be exaggerated to state that acknowledging the culture of silence implies the acknowledgment of the dominant culture, and both, as they are not brought about on their own, are composed of domination structures (Freire, 1979). In another direction, social invisibility (Tomás, 2010) and the culture of silence may bear a different connotation: they may refer to strategies for survival, resistance, and rebellion (Freire, 1979).

The readings of Freire (1979) and Jeanson (1973) suggest or allow the inference that cultural action should not focus *over* the non-public, but should be performed *with* such members of the community, in a propositional interaction propitiated with a search for a common language – respecting the language of non-users – for the joint construction of tools for contesting and participating.

Working with Brazilian social theory and, by extension, with the Latin-American scenario, Jessé Souza makes use of concepts of economic capital and cultural capital, based on Bourdieu, to analyze a portion of population made invisible, stigmatized, and excluded “from society” for not possessing such capitals. This class is, provocatively, called “structural rabble” (Souza, 2011).

Although it helped in its foundation, Bourdieu's field perspective, as Souza (2011) points out, neglected the reach attributed to the concept of "structural rabble" (Souza, 2011). Such a concept helps to criticize Marx's "Lumpenproletariat," as the subjects of the "rabble" supposedly lack the necessary knowledge to adapt to the current global capitalism (Souza, 2011). Nevertheless, even the "structural rabble" construct does not comprehend those the State neglects, as is the case of 2.7 million homeless Brazilians who, in 2023, still lack documents to prove their existence (Griesinger, 2023).

The members of the "structural rabble" are treated, by privileged classes, as disqualified bodies or simple physical tools and muscles. The existence of this "rabble" allows these middle and higher classes to hire, at low costs, the workforce needed to perform their daily tasks, guaranteeing them additional free time to keep their privileges. The members of the "rabble" often found themselves limited to precarious or low-paying occupations (Souza, 2011).

The "structural rabble" is ignored by the area of information. Social inequality, invisibility, and vulnerability are hidden under the idealized concept of information user, which represents the middle and higher classes. The concept of information user tends to disregard class conflicts and relations. In order for one to be considered a real user, one expects the potential user to possess economic and/or cultural capital, hence excluding the "structural rabble" (Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2020).

The State, by means of its cultural, educational, and informational devices, aims to develop public policies and conditions for individuals to cultivate desired knowledge and behaviors. Even in private contexts of cultural mediation, there is the assumption of such conformation. This takes place, in theory, facing the transmission of information to its appropriation and production of cultural repertoires and socially valued knowledge. In this perspective, members of the community should conform to the transmitted contents. The acting roles of the non-public depend on them to become the public. One infers, in this context, that arguments of Stengers' (2005) "*and so*" type tend to become the guides.

In an alternative theoretical perspective, emphasizing the need for institutions and professionals to adapt to the community's specificities, Flusser (1980), based on the works by Freire (1979) and Jeanson (1973), conceived an inclusive and democratic "cultural library-action." The library would be an ambient offering information and access to cultural heritage; furthermore, professionals would perform the role of mediators between information and the community, encouraging a critical reading of cultural manifestations.

In this context, many of the books would be written by the non-public. The institution would be part of the community, and the professionals working there would be integrated, belonging to the community. Indeed, cultural action is understood as a form of active research, allowing institutions to get to know the non-public's context and perspective. This makes it possible to dialog and to create comprehensible and stimulating words for this segment of the community. In this manner, criticality is encouraged, as is the development of their own voice, and the ability of acknowledging the non-public's authorship (Flusser, 1980).

The social construction of the non-user goes beyond the asymmetry of social classes. Information-mediating institutions may act based on prejudices, or may even not respect the diversity of individuals in the community, converting real and potential users into the condition of non-users, regardless of the social class to which those subjects belong (Rabello & Almeida Junior, 2022). Multiple factors contribute to this transition, including institutional obstacles (Silva & Bernardino, 2015). Such obstacles take various forms: architectural, communicational, instrumental, programmatic, methodological, and attitudinal. They cover from the lack of physical access, such as inadequate signage, lack of elevators, and ramps, lack of preoccupation of website usability, to the professionals attending to the deaf community lacking proficiency in sign language. Moreover, the hindrances may stem from the lack of adequate rules and equipment, or due to the lack of appropriate techniques to treat information, which may hinder its access, or, ultimately, it may occur because of the presence of prejudiced attitudes (Silva & Bernardino, 2015).

In this theoretical key, there is the need for institutional adequacy to obstacles and challenges. This opens the path for educators, researchers, and professionals in the area of information to acknowledge – "*in the presence of...*" (Stengers, 2005) – the subjects' culture, considering cultural manifestations beyond those socially and dominantly accepted or validated in given circles (Freire, 1979; Jeanson, 1973). Furthermore, in this perspective, the institution should value the *voice*, *authorship*, and *situations* of the subjects' need for information. Non-users' acting roles depend on institutional adaptation to non-users' singularities, whether

concerning their physical or mental condition, or gender, origin, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, among other conditions. For this attitudinal change, educators, researchers, and professionals need to transcend traditional deontological bases, no longer conceiving information mediation *for* the community, but instead doing it *with* the community.

## 6.2 Theoretical–Practical Receptivity and Restrictions Regarding the Concept of Non-User

Regarding theoretical research and professional action, theoretical–practical initiatives – so as to allow the non-public (non-users) to become public (users) – assume at least two interdependent aspects: 1) Praxiologies welcoming subjects and their practices (Rabello, 2021) and 2) Reflections on contributions and limitations of the concept of information non-user for a field concerning real and potential information users.

Both basic or theoretical research studies (with no practical purpose) and applied research studies (making use of theoretical knowledge to resolve practical problems) (Stokes, 2005) have been guiding studies on subjects in the area of information. This results in studies that do not necessarily aim to maintain or improve systems of information. However, the results of these studies can be applied with this purpose. Examples of research studies on everyday information practices follow.

Informational practices in the home environment (Kalms, 2008), whether performed by *queer* individuals (Floegel & Costello, 2019) or not, can be analyzed regarding given social problems. For example, for *queer* individuals, obstacles concerning prejudices can arise. In low-income families, householders' informational difficulties can be connected to questions related to social class. Examining immigrant practices (Caidi et al., 2010), the social class dimension also becomes relevant, as one considers economic and cultural capital for the immigrant's acceptance or permanence in the country.

In addition to immigrants, *queer* individuals, and householders, if the study of information practices considers, in the context of an institutionalized information system, persons from the “rabble,” one may investigate the non-user simultaneously with immigrants, *queer* individuals, householders, and those belonging to the “structural rabble” as non-public. The praxiologic transversality observed in this example demonstrates the capacity of the approach to welcome and receive different subjects and their practices in context (Rabello, 2021).

Other studies on the subject/information relation can bear the characteristic of basic research in everyday life, but not focus on the non-user, or have an application directed toward improving information systems. That is the case of those involving the use and interaction with digital platforms and devices, as in the example of farmers' use of the mobile phone for accessing agricultural information (Kumar, 2023), or Twitter interactions in the era of virtual academic conferences (Albertson & Rogers, 2023), or social unrest prediction through sentiment analysis on Twitter (Oladele & Ayetiran, 2023), among others.

The questions raised by the concept “information non-user” can allow the reflection not only on its contributions, but also to approach its limitations. Ultimately, these questions may lead to reflections on the restrictive or receptive character of directing the field in relation with the behaviors and practices of informational subjects.

The first question refers to the possibility of a terminological and conceptual opening more including for the subjects, their behaviors, and practices. In this case, the field would benefit if it would be concerned with “information user and non-user studies,” something which would represent a widening of scope for the investigation of the subject/information relation, as thinking only in terms of real or potential users tends to restrict subjects.

The second question refers to the place of the non-user in the field itself. The non-user can be considered a type of user, differing from the other two types: real and potential users. This is because, in the concept of non-user, at times, one also assumes, as a reference, the notion of information system. Thus, even when widening the direction of the field – realized in the expression “information user and non-user studies” – it could result in terminological redundancy.

Nevertheless, the materiality of the term “information user” is directly related to a conception in the field, according to the understanding that this subject refers to real and potential users. In this sense, ontic and epistemic limitations of the concept – based on this restricted understanding – adding to their ethical and political implications, could justify, albeit temporarily, the use of the term “information non-user” as a driver in the ambit of education, research, and professional practice.

The third question refers to the ontic limitation of the terms information user and non-user in relation with the process referent. The expressions suggest qualifying subjects who utilize or who do not utilize information, even if there is an epistemological cut that allows us to differentiate both conceptions. Employing the process use or no use – to name the subject – ends up limiting other action possibilities. For example, the field of information mediation has shown an interest in studying not only the process of use but also reading and appropriating information.

Indeed, the expression “informational subject” – and the studies that stem from it – has been employed as an alternative to the terms “information user” (Cruz & Araújo, 2020) and “non-user.” The word would comprehend conditions, difficulties, or the impediment to use, read, and appropriate information. In fact, the term has been employed to designate those in a situation of social vulnerability (Rendón-Rojas & García Cervantes, 2012), invisibility, and inequality.

How the academic community attributes meaning to the terms “information behavior” and “information practice” points toward apparently opposite directions (The Behaviour/Practice Debate, 2009). Acknowledging the ontological and epistemological non-neutrality of these perspectives (Savolainen, 2007), each continues naming poles where specific segments of the academic community of the area of information orbit. Alternatively, these perspectives can represent, in a single expression, “studies of information behavior and practice,” as long as the contributions and limits of each approach are contextualized.

The openness for these approaches tends to comprehend both favorable and adverse situations for seeking, using, reading, and appropriating information in the professional ambit, and in every life, involving, yet, settings of social vulnerability, invisibility, and inequality. In this direction, such studies also corroborate for a possible restriction or inadequacy of expressions such as “information user studies” or “information user and non-user studies.”

## 7 Conclusions

The term “information user,” referring to real and potential users, *(de)limits* the field of studies. Bearing in view the restrictions of this concept, the use of the term “information non-user” can be justified in education, research, and professional acting. The area of information should (re)examine theoretical–conceptual, social, and institutional obstacles, seeking more inclusive interventions.

Conceptually, the expression “information non-user” regards subjects who are possibly ignored, or out of interest or reach of the area of information. The term is presented as an alternative to widen the scope of the subjects of interest. It covers conditions at times imposed, leading to the impossibility or difficulty in adapting the subjects to the information system. However, the concept transcends the notion according to which it is related to the non-utilization of an institutional space that offers information services and products.

In a broader social context, the development of public policies, for example, seeks to intervene so as to promote a transformation in the “non-public” situation. These actions are performed by means of transmitting information and spreading a given culture, aiming for individuals to adapt to the socially expected behaviors and knowledge. The cultural, educational, and informational devices perform a strategic role in implementing these actions.

In specific non-traditional settings, institutions tend to adapt to acknowledge the culture and word of the non-public. In this context, there is an ethic and political placement beyond focusing on “socially accepted” cultures and manifestations. New acting roles are expected from a dialogic dimension, as institutions act *with* the community and value non-users’ *voice* and *authorship*.

The invitation to slow down and act “*in the presence of...*” (Stengers, 2005) in studies concerning the subject/information relation, contemplating studies on information and community, highlights the ethic and political dimension of epistemological and theoretical–methodological choices. These decisions reflect the worldview of information educators, researchers, and professionals, influencing the scope of subjects to be considered. These choices may grant *voice* and *prioritize* certain subjects, behaviors, and practices. In another direction, they can render others *silent* and *invisible*, preventing acting roles.

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