So wide and varied: the British origins of information science

Lyn Robinson and David Bawden
City University London
The ‘British School’ of information science

• Jason Farradane at City University London, from 1961

• inspiration from
  – special libraries (Aslib)
  – documentation (Otlet)
Five distinctive characteristics

- subject-based
- broad approach
- academic subject, professional remit
- involved with, but distinct from, IT
- involved with GLAM sector, and with memory institutions
Subject based

• originally science information, later broadened
• belief that information can be studied only in a disciplinary context (arguably forerunner of domain analysis)
Some qualified scientists moved .. Into a new occupational role, that of providing an active information service to their colleagues. They regarded themselves as “information scientists” rather than “research scientists”

Brian Vickery
Broad approach

• deals with all aspects of information

• an integrating science, or meta-discipline, interacting with many others
Information science will be concerned with the integration of the contributions of the other sciences, much as ecology is today ... an integrating science

Jack Meadows
Academic subject, professional remit

• move from a vocational subject to an academic discipline
• towards a true ‘science of information’
• academic education rather than vocational training
• but retain a link with the profession
• theory AND practice
Bertie Brookes and I shared a common view that, beyond the practical activities of information provision, there could be discerned a more general science of information.

Brian Vickery
Involved with IT, but distinct from it

- particularly through information retrieval
- emphasis on understanding implications of technology

- but never formally embraced IT, choosing a different path to ASIS/ASIST
Involved with the GLAM sector, and with memory institutions

• perhaps reflecting roots in special librarianship

• Institute of Information Scientists merged with Library Association in 2002 (to the dismay of some)
Lessons for today

• Be involved with technology, but don’t be consumed by it
• Be academic and scholarly, but don’t forget the practitioner
• Be concerned with all aspects and instances of information, but with a focus on our special interests: recorded information in subject domains
Let us not restrict ourselves to grubbing around in the garden patch of a limited, little information science, restricted to the relationship between information and machine. Instead, let us expand, reach out, embrace and explore the wider world of information, to develop a vision of information science as a central synthesising discipline in understanding not simply information, but the world we live in. because the world we live in is surely a word of information.

Tom Wilson