

Abstract of panel session for CoLIS 2010

For and against unity in Library and Information Science theory: unity in diversity or irreconcilable conflict?

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The objective of this session was to present different arguments for and against unity in LIS to provide different perspectives on the conference themes, in particular, ‘theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of the communication of information’, and provide a forum for debate and discussion. Three perspectives were proposed through short presentations on what we mean by unity and whether is possible or indeed desirable within LIS and then the discussion was opened up to the audience.

Firstly the view was proposed by Clare Thornley that the complex, diverse and contradictory nature of LIS’s key subject matter, meaning and information, suggests that unity in LIS is fundamentally a problematic objective. Any field that deals with meaning and information is unlikely to have theoretical unity as we can see, for example, in the many different competing theories of meaning in the philosophy of language. This argument draws on her work on a dialectical model (Thornley, 2005; Thornley and Gibb, 2007; Thornley and Gibb, 2009) and its application to LIS and information retrieval in particular. Meaning and information can be understood as dialectical relationships between the subjective and the objective in which these aspects both repel and require each other. Thus the concepts with which LIS works can only have unity in the dialectical sense of a temporary and unstable relationship between opposites. Theoretical unity can possibly exist but only if we acknowledge

the inherent conflict, as well as the connections, within and between our central concepts.

There is also a conflict, or certainly a lack of connection, between theory in LIS and those that work in implementation and system design. LIS theory does not have a good track record of 'delivering' robust improvement in either system design or, indeed, professional practice in general. Does this matter? This question itself reveals that perhaps LIS is divided on whether it is pure academic subject or one that should be in service to technological and professional developments? Thus we have a unity problem with how we understand our subject matter and we have a unity problem on how we should use that understanding.

Ian Cornelius then argued that internal coherence can be achieved through the development of compelling and convincing approaches to information problems which both distinguish LIS's unique contribution and make clear connections to the work of related fields. The desire for unity, theoretical, practical, and conceptual, in any science is understandable and in some cases achievable, but its absence should not hinder progress or the development of new knowledge in any field of study. LIS has seen many pleas for, and attempts to create, some intellectual unity. Claims for unity can appeal to the need for such unity for better progress, for better understanding of what the field might be, and for enhanced status with other disciplines. He argued that the unity we seek is attainable but should be conceived in different and broader terms from those we normally address. In particular our relationship to other sciences is best understood with a very broad understanding of what characterises unity in LIS.

He discussed arguments first advanced in his book *meaning and method in Information Studies*, where he proposed that we see the field as mutating through time through different conceptions as each new generation seeks a key to the characteristic information problem of its age and the best means of representing itself to the broader community. We (in all disciplines) are faced with two tasks, those of establishing internal coherence within the field and the task of establishing some external

reference that allows others to understand where we fit into to broader community. In the case of LIS these tasks are complicated by the dual persona LIS has as a profession and as a discipline studying some area of knowledge. To maintain claims to be a profession we need the intellectual foundation of the discipline, but establishing the knowledge claims that we need seems to take the discipline some way from the practice of the profession. At worst, weak arguments for the discipline lead professionals to assert that the primary purpose is to 'get on with the job', and not to worry about intellectual progress in the field as long as service is delivered. All professional fields face this problem, so we are not alone, and many disciplines that appear well- founded suffer as many fractional tendencies as does LIS. Politics, for example comprises both political theory and studies of voter behaviour, two areas that do not often cross-reference one another's literatures: Geography can be said to suffer even greater extensional stresses.

Internal coherence has been the focus for attempts at establishing theoretical unity in LIS, but the case for establishing effective external reference is equally deserving of our time. Effectively, in LIS we are competing with other fields that concern themselves in one or more aspects of information. Cognitive Science is obviously wholly focused on the development of understanding of how information is used. Computer Science uses information and is also concerned in part with establishing that it can handle all the problems associated with organising and delivering knowledge. Many other fields - management, sociology, economics are examples have some concern with information and have working understandings of what it means in their own fields, and all disciplines use and transfer information. The task of LIS is to establish its claims in The Academy to have a useful contribution to make about information problems. In other words, we must have compelling grounds for other fields to pay attention to us and to recognize our space in the intellectual spectrum. This requires that we have a representation of our field that presents a narrative unity and a universally recognizable focus, but which can allow the same kinds of internal variations, caesura, and redirections that are common, and accepted, in natural sciences. Internal coherence needs to be inclusive, tolerant, and progressive, rather than prescriptive, exclusionary, and unyielding in problem definition.

Birger Hjørland presented the view that LIS is in a crisis caused by fragmentation and a lack of common perspectives. Not only do we have difficulties in defining concepts such as “information,” “meaning” and “relevance”, but there is no indication that main-stream information science cares whether such concepts are defined one way or another. Still worse, there is not much indication that we listen to and respect each other’s arguments.

In 2005 Fisher, Erdelez & McKechnie (eds.) published *Theories of information behavior* presenting 72 theories (or rather a mixture of theories and topics). (And there are many approaches not covered by that book, in Hjørland’s opinion also very important views). This is a symptom of the great fragmentation of our field. Is this a problem? Certainly, new ideas and theories are something positive. However, they must be seriously considered and carefully chosen. IS need to make progress, which involves that some theories are selected others are tried and dismissed. It is a serious problem if important views are hidden by an overwhelming number of less important views.

In 2003 Ørom published an article about knowledge organization in the Arts. Hjørland often uses this article as a paradigm of his own view. Ørom demonstrated the connections between paradigms in arts and how arts are classified in library classification systems. IS students who have understood Ørom’s article is well qualified for any kind of information work related to the arts because the “paradigms” define the criteria of relevance. Hjørland has never encountered serious questioning of this approach to information science which suggests that it may be the least problematic one we have?

This view may be mistaken or unfruitful but the only way to find out is to argue for another position. Such an argument could reveal disagreements or partial agreement. The point is, however, that we have a lot of fragmented positions. We have very little meta-theoretical research exploring strong and weak sides of different approaches and too few attempts to reduce disagreements.

Conclusions and debate

This session provoked a lively debate about the purpose and usefulness of LIS theory for the wider information field such as information retrieval and the importance or otherwise of unity. There was no clear agreement, perhaps not surprisingly given the subject matter, but a key theme was the importance of asking ourselves how any particular theory helps us to better make sense of the problems of LIS. There were, however, different views on how we can identify and tackle these problems. So, perhaps the best 'test' of any LIS theory is does it help us identify key problems in the first place? If we can agree on central problems then perhaps a diversity in methods of 'making sense' of them and tackling them is positive diversity rather than dangerous fragmentation.

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