Literary Studies, Business Studies — and Information Science? Yes, It's a Key Discipline for the Empowerment of Publishing Studies for the Digital Age

In What Way Information Science Can Inform Publishing Studies[1] in the Face of the Ongoing Digital Transitions

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Abstract

This paper describes the current situation of publishing studies as the "modern" part of book studies in German-speaking countries, especially with respect to their mission and their typical organization as well as staffing resources. In the face of ongoing groundbreaking digital transitions in the book industry and the book media system as a whole, it argues that the prevailing literary studies and business studies approaches (with their specific theories and methods) might have the effect that publishing studies fall short of the needs for sufficiently sound analyses and insights as expressed by the book industry and other media-related academic disciplines. Recently, some of the relevant academic work on the digitization of book economy and book cul-

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1 This paper is written with the "modern" part of book studies in Germany in the focus (see below, footnote 2); it might be possible, though, to transfer some of its thoughts to "stand-alone" publishing studies as they are pursued e.g. at many British universities.

ture has been done by scholars from disciplines such as business studies, business informatics or media and communication studies. As a remedy, the paper recommends a stronger orientation of publishing studies towards information science. To underpin this position from the perspective of the prospective partner discipline, it summarizes (and tries to get to the heart of) the current community-internal discourse on the self-conception etc. of information science. As a desk research project, the paper essentially links first results of ongoing research on publishing studies research units and study programmes by the author with a goal-oriented discussion of the consolidated discourse in information science on its fundamentals. It does that partly mediated by a few philosophy of science concepts concerning academic transitions, especially the discipline-specific transitions from data about phenomena to hypotheses.

1   Introduction

Despite recent thoughts in the direction of a more open view, book studies in Germany[2] are seen (and consequently also organizationally treated) as a humanities discipline; this view is also applied to their work on the current book industry or book media system, respectively. It is, however, in contrast to the fact that from the point of view of e.g. German national infrastructure programmes, esp. concerning the information infrastructure, book studies are

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2 In German-speaking countries, research and teaching related to the book as a medium or with respect to its „materiality" aspects, respectively, is typically done in university units/institutes and study programmes (BA, MA) called "Buchwissenschaft(en)" (study of the book/book studies, henceforth book studies). "Buchwissenschaft", and this is of course a simplification, consists of one part which in other parts of the world is book history and a second part which, looking at e.g. Oxford Brooks or Edinburgh Napier in Britain, could rightly be called publishing studies. This latter part covers the current book economy and culture. In spite of trying to highlight a contrast here: of course, also British-style publishing studies are well conscious of relevant historical developments, mind you.

covered in a group together with essentially non-humanities disciplines, namely library science and information science.[3]

Utilizing ongoing research into publishing studies institutions and study programmes in Britain,[4] I will make the point that as dysfunctional as it would be to link the whole of book studies (i.e., including the dominating book history) to information science, information science is probably indeed one of the closest disciplines to the "modern" part of book studies, probably alongside business studies. As a side remark, it can be noted that – among all the institutions that belong to English / cultural studies or business / creative industries departments, respectively, as one might expect – there is in fact one publishing studies unit in Britain that belongs to an information studies[5] department.

If arguing the connection between different disciplines or "disciplines" (see below), in this case: between the "modern" part of book studies and information science, is to be more than mere and pretty subjective concept-dropping (as it were), we would have to justify this connection by pondering commonalities and influences. Such commonalities and influences can be with respect to e.g. the subject of study, but also to theories and methods.

With the philosophy of science conception by Balzer (2009) in the background, this paper will take a look at the self-conception of information science and check, how far information science[6] can be made effective for the "modern" part of book studies.

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3 Cf. http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/projekte-forschung/projektdetails/projekt/vifa-b2i/, the project homepage of the corresponding finished project, ViFa b2i, the virtual domain library for book studies, library science and information science, funded by the German Research Council (DFG).

4 First results of this research I have presented at the "International Conference on Publishing Trends and Contexts" in Pula (HR) on December 9th, 2014 (cf. https://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Conference-on-Publishing-Trends-and-Contexts/211043419073280?sk=timeline&ref=page_internal and http://www.informationr.net/ir/20-1/paper653.html#.VMIL47k5Djo).

5 As a scholar having been exposed to the not all that enlightening book studies vs. study of the book discussion in recent years, I will certainly keep off a possible information science vs. information studies discussion ...

6 I will not dwell on the partly striking similarities between information science on the one hand and business informatics / information system research (in German: "Wirtschaftsinformatik") on the other here. Cf. e.g. Wilde & Hess (2006).

2   A very concise "philosophy of science" reference frame

A suitable way of making two academic fields commensurable is to relate them to an accepted top-down view on the academic modus operandi. An approach to classify the academic "system" with the help of suitable categories is the one by Balzer (2009). According to his view, theories (in a broader sense) primarily consist of parts of the world in focus (Balzer calls them intended systems), a class of models (which themselves consist of structures as entities describing relevant aspects of the focused parts of the world and especially hypotheses, axioms, laws, etc. connected to these structures) and – very importantly – data from the focused parts of the world, hard or weak. Although hypotheses etc. are only a part of a theory in Balzer's view, as we have seen, they can be taken as the theories in a narrow sense, not least since they cover pretty much what a theory is in everyday language.

According to Balzer, there are basic patterns of academic transitions, particularly in the stage, in which theories emerge. Balzer – with many others – identifies them as induction and deduction, induction being the process of detecting regularities or hypotheses on the basis of data which have been gathered from the examination of the ("intended") system in focus. Deduction is the generation of statements on states and events not directly observed or forecasts made, respectively, on the basis of data / observations and "applying" hypotheses. Interestingly, Balzer sees the classic form of humanities reasoning – hermeneutics – outside these two basic patterns, as a third one. He sees the core of hermeneutics in classing new complex events (typically such in which human actions play a constitutive role) or artifacts into an existing body of knowledge, hence understanding (a central hermeneutics concept) it. Of course, both the situation to be understood and the body of knowledge can be descriptions, statutes, or literary texts – in fact, they typically are.

Considering this, it can be said that academic disciplines differ with respect to how they organize the processes that put the relations between the intended systems they have in focus, the data gathered from them and the hypotheses etc. to life. Leaving hermeneutics aside, the gathering of data can be done by applying different ways of measuring (with all the complications implied, especially in post theory of relativity times); this is the case in a pure form for the (natural) sciences and for applied sciences like engineering. Or

this gathering can be done by measuring in a somewhat metaphorical sense, trying to make the immeasurable (like e.g. happiness or intelligence) measurable. This is the case for social "sciences", where they try to "operationalize" expressions of human behaviour etc. with the help of indicators. The corresponding set of methods from observations via surveys and interviews to experiments are called methods of empirical social research. Physics is a typical representative of the first group (natural sciences), most activities in political science or sociology are representatives of the second (social sciences).

For the context of this paper, it is important to note that there is at least one other top-level approach to generate knowledge in the form of theories etc., which is not explicitly mentioned by Balzer; we could call it the "'construction-scholarly' paradigm". This paradigm („konstruktions-wissenschaft-liches Paradigma", cf. Wilde & Hess 2006: 10) has been expatiated for business informatics or information system research. Using this approach, academics try to answer scholarly questions by solving (practical) problems, typically by building computer systems that provide solutions. As will be revealed during the discussion of the self-conception of information science below, a very similar approach is seen as one of the core propositions of information science.

3.   Publishing studies[7] as a traditional field of study and new needs caused by digital transitions

As a preliminary bottom line of my research on publishing studies programmes and institutions in Britain, I can say that publishing studies are typically seen as a field that is best described as "not yet" a discipline (despite showing a whole range of features of a discipline from domain journals to domain conferences already). It is seen as a field of academic work in which a comprehensive and fundamental cultural practice is further devel-

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7 In this chapter, I will focus on UK publishing studies. These, however, have a lot in common with the "modern" part of book studies, especially with respect to the features considered.

oped, using the specific strengths of academia[8] (intellectual rigour, licence to experiment and to make mistakes, etc. – cf. Maxwell 2014). Research in a narrower sense of the word is typically done selectively by people who use the theories and methods they bring from their individual academic backgrounds. At the moment, among the key figures in publishing studies book history and literary studies (both hermeneutical) clearly prevail as backgrounds, with business studies and sociology being scattered alternatives. The relatively small number of junior academics (with PhDs) educated and socialized in publishing studies is one of the reasons, why most people in the community would not see publishing studies as a discipline in its own right at present. The lack of a "bird's eyes" view across the selective results of publishing studies research is perceived as another.

To see the whole picture, this somewhat community-internal perspective has to be complemented by the observation that the book industry as the natural reference industry of publishing studies is in a phase of transition(s) that is / are fundamental at a degree not seen for many centuries. Therefore, publishing studies are confronted with requirements from the industry and partly also from neighbouring academic disciplines to describe, class and explain the exiting developments appropriately. This is a problem not least because these transitions happen at a much faster pace than the natural cycle where generations of academics teaching publishing studies would be replaced by academics who bring new new theoretical and methodological skills to the table. Because obviously, for the challenge mentioned book studies approaches informed primarily by history and literary studies just do not suffice – even if traditional business studies approaches from marketing to accounting are added. To mention only a few aspects in the era of digitization that require methodological and theoretical approaches beyond hermeneutics: many current publishing products are sophisticated bundles of content and technology – to do them justice (also academically) requires solid knowledge about ICT systems in general as well as their core technologies, software engineering, etc. In addition, the media convergence in the wake of digitization suggests audience measurement methodologies (formerly reading research) that are comparable with the ones in other media systems in terms of their methodological rigour. Publishing studies, therefore, have to look for

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8 The cultural practice and experimental aspect mentioned here is specific to Anglo-Saxon publishing studies; it would most probably not be shared by key representatives of, e.g., German book studies.

additional "importing" disciplines which provide the suitable approaches, research paths, benchmarks, possibly the theories and methods to tackle the digital transitions. The publishing studies stakeholders need to take measures from co-operation to modified criteria for professorial appointments. As pointed out, digital book industry products are as much also economic goods as printed ones are, therefore business studies hence indeed continue to be important. Since information science – itself entangled in discussions about the self-conception of the "discipline" (see below) – is critically informed by computer science, it is in a better position to dwell on business issues closely connected to technological ones (which is, as has been mentioned, often or even typically the case with digital media phenomena).

4   Information science from a distance

Approaching it from outside the community – and also to save time for the issues in focus –, I took the liberty to consult more or less consolidated handbook views of the discussions about the self-conception etc. of information science.

First of all, information science also does not see itself as a discipline, at least not as a traditional one; the reasons for this view are not very different from the ones concerning publishing studies, as the following quotes show: "[…] [T]his science, at around fifty years of age, is still relatively young when compared to the established disciplines […]. Secondly, information science is strongly interrelated with other disciplines, e.g. information technology (IT) and economics […]"[9] (Stock & Stock 2013: 3). As "[t]he central concern of information science" they see "'cultural engagement', or, more precisely, 'enabling people to become better informed (learning, more knowledgeable)'" (ibid.: 7, partly according to Buckland). Moreover, and this is particularly important, "[i]nformation science nearly always – even in questions of basic research – looks towards technological feasibility, incorporating user or usage as a matter of principle. It locates its object of research by investigating existing systems […] or creating experimental systems."

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9 Despite this, the Stocks see "information science […] by no means [as] a mixture of other sciences, but [as] a science in its own right" (Stock & Stock 2013: 7).

(ibid.). The Stocks go on: "[...] [A]s a whole the discipline is rather oriented towards application. Even though certain phenomena may not yet be entirely resolved on a theoretical basis, an information scientist will still go ahead and create workable systems" (ibid.: 10). The Stocks' (ibid.: 10) quoting of Raganathan's five laws of information science from 1931, the last one of which, the 5th one being "Information practice and information science are growing organisms" can be seen as a methodological statement giving the practice a fundamental role in the process of generating knowledge.

Among a whole range of possible alternatives, but pretty much in line with the previous, Kuhlen sets out using a more theoretical approach. He begins with holding the premise that "[f]or a foundation of information science [...] the pragmatic primacy of information (contextual, action-oriented) [is] decisive" (Kuhlen et al. 2013: 3) – information, he says, is knowledge in action and in context, as a customary phrase in the information community goes. Kuhlen goes on: "The diverse knowledge about information is relevant for information science only insofar, as it helps to support the 'how', how to make knowledge from information in a certain situation. This has to do a lot with technology, but also with cognition, social behaviour, the economy, law, ethics, …" (ibid.: 5). Kuhlen claims that such an approach with social, pragmatic and communicative aspects in the focus is "absolutely compatible with a more technical, experimental and constructivist view of information science (i.e. one, according to which actual information services are yielded in the process of doing research, C.B.). The pragmatic inclusion of the action context of the user has a practical relevance for the interventional research and development work to create the conditions for the possibility for the actual information work" (ibid.: 17). Kuhlen finishes his considerations with the conclusion, that "the pragmatic view on information, the subjectively controlled understanding of information as knowledge put to action in concrete contexts for the benefit of personal, private, professional and social, political development is an attractive proposal compared with the primarily technical and commercial views on information" (ibid.: 18 f.). Saying this, Kuhlen rearranges consensual elements of information science reflections (see above) to a certain extent: technical and economical considerations are indeed in the focus, but only have a serving function for forwarding the information world, for improving people's access to information etc.

In their volume about the methods of library and information science, Konrad Umlauf, Simone Fühles-Ubach and Michael Seadle abstain from considering in detail, what kind of academic discipline exactly (if at all) in-

formation science is. They go right on to methodological issues: "It becomes clear that Library and Information Science is a heterogeneous discipline which picks up methods from many neighbouring disciplines like sociology and ethnology as well as computer science" (Umlauf et al. 2013: 22). In the remainder of the volume, they present the methods that are actually used in information (and library) science research. Most of them belong to the traditional set of the quantitative and qualitative ones that have been used and are used throughout the social sciences, like surveys and interviews (see above).[10] Moreover, new methods specifically geared to researching ("born"-) digital phenomena, like logfile and link analyses, usability research, informetry (as Umlauf et al. call it), information system evaluation as well as modelling and tests are introduced.[11]

To summarize: a review of relevant current handbooks of information science presents this as a discipline that is characterised mainly by its proximity to computer science, its methodological and theoretical diversity as well as its orientation to implementation and usage aspects, but also by its engagement for an improvement of information life and its specific interplay between theory and practice.

5   Conclusion: information science and publishing studies (as the "modern" part of book studies)

Publishing studies influence the development of publishing as a cultural practice by taking part in this practice, using the specific factors and opportunities at universities.[12] Moreover, Publishing Studies academics typically

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10 Not sufficiently separated from the other chapters, it seems, some of the techniques for evaluating gathered data (by cluster analysis and discriminant analysis, content analysis) are also top-level topics of the volume.

11 Interestingly –and without mentioning hermeneutical methods as the indispensable historical link –, also discourse analysis in the line of tradition of distribution linguistics of the 1950s as well as of French structuralism and post-structuralism are covered in the volume (Umlauf et al. 2013: 425–443).

12 As I have mentioned above, this aspect could certainly be reinforced and made more explicit in, e.g., German book studies.

research the book as a medium / in its "materiality", the book communication system as a cultural and social field or the book business, respectively, using the theories and methods they bring from the disciplines in which they have been educated, from business and literary studies to (book) history and sociology. This results in an inspiring body of academic work, but it might not suffice to accompany (and possibly help shape) the digital transitions appropriately, particularly not when compared with the scholarly work done with respect to other media systems.

In search for a discipline that could inform publishing studies in a coherent way to put it in a better position for this somewhat historic task, information science is a strong candidate indeed. An "import" from information science to publishing studies might evolve as rather unselective in the beginning, but – certainly after appropriate selections and modifications – might turn out to be an important contribution. Information science's relevance-filtered mediation of elements from computer science, its constitutive contributions to the digital developments of a cultural practice in action (experimental systems, possibly ahead of an in-depth understanding of what makes them work), the view of a concerted development of practice and academic endeavour as well as its decisive multi-perspectivity and its "built-in" ambition to support the social and cultural development of individuals, communities and societies, will be a valuable inspiration. It will also provide a helpful theoretic and methodological supplement to the hermeneutical and business studies core of the "modern" part of book studies as it stands, especially for the research of aspects of the digital transitions. To give an example of this from my own research: when we tried to find out, if and how far the use of mobile technologies could make the book value chain more effective and/or efficient (and maybe even evoke new products and services) (cf. Bläsi & Kuhn 2011), we as book studies scholars "had" to use methods from implementing ICT systems with field partners to accompanying their application in the form of continuous observation and discussion; these are approaches that had not been in the core set of book studies research methods previously, but certainly are common to information science.

It is true that a few methods of empirical social research have slowly become part of the book studies set of methods within the last few years, through their exchange with e.g. business studies, sociology and communication studies. The "value-added" (as it were) mediation of these methods via information science that also uses them to a great extent, however, looks particularly worthwhile. Most notably, however, I do not see an alternative to

the integration of computer science concepts and of ideas concerning a sophisticated and beneficial practice-theory interplay into book studies; an obvious option to achieve this is a close exchange with information science.

It is important to note, however, that the hermeneutical, inherently non-affirmative "critical thinking" potential of book studies as a traditional humanities field[13] still is absolutely essential – particularly in times of major transitions. Not to overstate the argument for information science's relevance for book studies, there are two more points to be made. Firstly, book studies – with all their focus on "materiality" aspects – traditionally also conduct research on parts of the book media system where they necessarily have to take a closer look at the content, namely in the case of types of "bookish" texts that are not covered by literary studies (the customary discipline in charge for content) or by information science (this holds for the case of academic publications). Among such texts are school and tertiary education textbooks, popular non-fiction books, etc. Secondly, and connected to the first point, publishing studies also have communication acts in their focus with purposes other than simply to inform, namely e.g. entertainment, edification, etc. ones. Due to the academics with literary studies, book history, business studies and sociology backgrounds, publishing studies are well equipped for those two tasks – even in digital times.

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13 "A lot has been different in the past or is different in other places of the world – it might therefore be fundamentally different here in the future. People trained in the humanities have experienced that again and again in the course of their studies and they therefore can deal with the challenges of a world in transition particularly well", as an intuitive argument e.g. at humanities graduation ceremonies goes.

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