Brian Vickery and the foundations of information science

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The nature of information science

Photo of Brian Vickery removed for copyright reasons

- ten main topics and issues
- in his own words

What is information science?

[There has been] a widening of the field covered by the concept of 'information', both its theory and its practice. Information transfer has been put on a par with the transfer of matter and energy, as one of the primary natural processes.

Information science as a field of study

.. it is most important – particularly in an immature field like information science - to accept that all modes of study and all analytical methods can make useful contributions, and not to denigrate [qualitative] modes as 'just description'

The core of information science

Information science is concerned with every aspect of the chain of information transfer activities, but the heart of its interest is information search

Information science and other disciplines

All the elements of the process of 'becoming informed' … are of interest to investigators other than 'information scientists' … The totality of activity related to information to information today is necessarily a multidisciplinary exercise.

Cognate information disciplines

[Information] science and technology are now so closely linked that analysis and experiment lead quickly on to invention, to the introduction of new channels (and documents).

Theory and practice

There does seem to be among some members of our profession a rather desperate search for a "fundamental theory of information", [which] rarely makes adequate contact with the realities of information practice … The theory of a science should spring from deep immersion in its practice.

Education for information science

Only in a very static profession can one be trained to slot in immediately to an available job, and our profession is far from static. It is more beneficial for the students to give them a generalised grounding in a wide variety of professional activities and concerns, so that they will have some background knowledge for no matter what job is first available. For those who seek it, our subject also has its cultural value, which can contribute to a general education.

The importance of the user

Perhaps the most important lesson that we can learn from information history is that information provision has been and must be closely related to information need, and that the information sources we provide must be close matched to the tasks being undertaken by the community served.

Knowledge organisation

Information retrieval is now an accepted part of the new discipline of information science .. I have concentrated on the field with which I am most familiar, the problems of bibliographic description and subject analysis

Looking backwards..

I suspect that teaching the history of our subject is less frequent in our institutions than it was. We are getting short-sighted both in looking forward and in looking backward, to our detriment.

.. and forwards

"research in information science is still marked by a tendency to play safe.. it is still marked by timidity. It could now afford to be more boldly speculative, intellectually exciting and therefore more attractive to intelligent and ambitious students." Have things changed?