

chapter nine

Whither LIS Research: Ideology, Funding, and Educational Standards

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Lack of agreement about what the focus of LIS research should be and the appropriate methodologies to employ have fragmented the research community into several ideological camps. This lack of focus combined with the broadened definition of "information" and interest in studying it has created opportunities for researchers in other disciplines to garner a larger and larger share of federally funded research grants. The research infrastructure cannot be improved unless prominent researchers oversee educational standards.

What qualifies as library/information science research? Is it any type of investigation conducted by people who call themselves librarians or information scientists? Or, must the investigation focus solely on matters closely related to libraries, their users, and containers of information such as books and databases. Or, would the research be "better" if it were more cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary? Should it be based on a theory? Must the theory fit a particular paradigm? Must hypotheses be stated and tested? Does research require the collection of data that can be counted? Must those data be subjected to statistical testing? Is discovering new knowledge a requisite? Does the investigation have to prove something? Are the findings more important if they help solve practical problems?

All these questions, and more, have been raised in the professional literature by proponents or opponents of various sides. The very fact that these questions can be raised is itself an indication that there is no overarching paradigm, no consensus within the discipline. The objectives of this chapter are to describe the ideological differences that hinder progress in the discipline, to document the decline of interest in research by Federal funding agencies, and to demonstrate the failure of the profession's leadership to provide affirmation of the importance of research.

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DIFFERENCES IN IDEOLOGY

Traditionally, research conducted by librarians has been bibliography-related. However, the focus and types of research have shifted rather dramatically in the past 60 years, or so, from bibliography and historical descriptions of libraries (the preponderance of the dissertations done in the early years at the University of Chicago) to a greater number of studies based on the counting of phenomenon and then subjecting those counts to statistical testing. One factor contributing to this shift has certainly been the efforts by some in the academic community to emulate the methods of scientific research—hypothesis testing and the use of inferential statistics—to demonstrate the "science" in library and information science. Yet, almost everyone who has written about research in librarianship agrees that it could be better. They disagree over what constitutes better, about how to make it better, and for whom to make it better.

As in all academic areas, library and information science (LIS) researchers fall into distinct clusters, with yet finer distinctions within clusters. The major division in LIS is between the *Quals* and the *Quant*s. Naturally, both groups disagree about the importance of mathematics, especially statistics, in research. But they differ even more over the problems to be investigated and the methods to be employed. The *Quals* tend to use social science methods, such as historiography, ethnography and qualitative sociology, to study the "library" and its users in terms of social phenomenon. Their approach is inductive in that they use documents, observations, and interviews to build their conclusions. The *Quant*s are interested in finding, if not laws, at least patterns to predict how phenomenon will behave. Their approach is deductive in that they specify what they are attempting to prove and what variables will be used before any data are collected. They are adherents of what is popularly known as the "scientific method."

The first researchers in the field (that is, in Librarianship, long before there was an Information Science) were *Quals*. They were primarily historians—of books, libraries, librarians, bibliography, and publishing; and all the ancillary elements of the book trade. David Kaser and Haynes McMullin are examples of contemporary *Quals*. One characteristic of the historians is that, alone among the LIS researchers, they seldom write introspective pieces about the nature of LIS research. They simply continue their historical projects in their own individual ways.

The Social Theorists represent a newer contingent of *Quals*. They insist that research must not ignore the historical and cultural factors in society at large which have exerted, and continue to exert, great influence over the library as an institution. The most persuasive proponent of the social theorists is Harris (1986a, 1986b). In a *Library Trends* paper, he argues that research ought to focus on what Shera (1965, p. 29) called "social epistemology," "the analysis of the production, distribution, and utilization of intellectual products in much the same

fashion as that in which the production, distribution, and utilization of material products have long been investigated."

Contemporary research, Harris (1986b, p. 217) believes, has instead concentrated on finding solutions to internal administrative problems of "performance, productivity, and usefulness." He claims the "scientific" approach has led to "a body of literature that is fragmented and reductionist" (p.222).

Further, he charges that researchers have "fallen prey to the siren called 'positivism,'" undue concentration on observable phenomena and facts without any inquiry into causes (p. 218). In an earlier paper (1986a, p. 522), he dismisses the scientists' contributions by charging that "a positivist approach has proven of little value as a means of producing knowledge of social reality. It seems equally clear that library physics is not about to begin."

He charges (1986b, p. 222) that although LIS research is "increasingly technically sophisticated, it is also increasingly trivial." Harris maintains that the search for a paradigm in the social sciences has been fruitless and mostly abandoned since the 1960s.

The *Quants*, in contrast to the *Quals*, are vastly more concerned with numbers, statistics, probabilities, and paradigms. Despite their reliance on quantitative methods, the *Quants* are also split into two disparate camps—the *Scientists* and the *Engineers*. Houser is a leading proponent of the view that *library* research should adhere to the scientific method as described by Kuhn (1962). According to Houser (1988), the point of research is to test theory which fits within a disciplinary paradigm. The theory should be tested by verifying hypotheses. Such an approach would permit explanation and prediction of phenomenon, which in turn would build our knowledge base in a coherent manner. He says unless these things are done, librarianship cannot claim to be a discipline. He argues that the proper focus of library research is the study of literatures.

His own analysis of the papers published in the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* denies the existence of an information science. Houser (1988, p.3) claims that what is called information science is

merely library science. . . . There is no scientific community of information scientists. In fact, there is no justification for naming a new branch of science information science. . . . and no justification for people to term themselves "information scientists."

Contrasting with Houser's *Scientist* view are the opinions of the *Engineers*—those who actually call themselves "information scientists." A former president of the American Society for Information Science (Williams, 1988, pp. 17-18) readily conceded that the group is an amalgam of many disciplines. She acknowledges that information science "uses the theories, principles, techniques and technologies of a variety of disciplines toward the solution of information problems." This liberal view can be considered eclectic, or as evidence that the

entire field is in disarray. Some evidence for the latter view is indicated by the diversity in educational preparation and programs in "information science," with students enrolled in library schools, business schools, and engineering departments.

The outstanding characteristic of the *Engineers* is their emphasis on pragmatic problem solving. At the more mundane level, they attack problems of organization, management, and control in "conventional" libraries. At a more complex level, they are attacking, in bits and pieces, the problem of designing an "information retrieval" system that actually retrieves data of interest to an inquirer. Ideally, they strive for a system which gets past the black marks on the paper to uncover meaning. If technology is not the solution to all problems, it is certainly the first place they look. The solution to problems is defined as the need to make the technology better or to learn how to use it better. They tend to write terse, equation-laden papers for the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* and *Information Processing and Management*. One sometimes wonders about the substantive value of these efforts. When reviewing a group of papers in information science, Robert Fairthorne supposedly remarked: "It is not a question of the emperor having no clothes, but of some very elaborate clothes covering no emperor."

This lack of consensus about what problems to study and what methods to employ has perhaps contributed to a declining interest on the part of major agencies in funding proposals submitted by LIS researchers. These agencies are turning to researchers in other disciplines for new approaches to the study of information problems. This intellectual disarray, at least in part, stems from the apparent lack of interest on the part of those who approve educational standards, such as the American Library Association's Committee on Accreditation, to insist on setting any standards for scholarship.

THE AGENCIES FUNDING RESEARCH

Library researchers, whether *Quants* or *Quals*, have been getting a progressively smaller and smaller share of the Federal research dollar. Cuadra Associates' (1982) *A Library and Information Science Research Agenda for the 1980s: Final Report* identified 600 projects funded through the 1970s. The report determined that most of the money for research support, \$51.5 million, came from three Federal agencies. These were the National Science Foundation's Division of Information Science and Technology, \$33 million; the Department of Education's Office of Libraries and Learning Resources, \$10.5 million; and the National Library of Medicine (NLM), \$8 million. Although these same agencies were also the major sources of funding during the 1980s, their funding patterns have undergone substantial change.

Despite the Federal deficit and the widespread impression that the Reagan