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How do you solve a problem like Michael?

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Abstract

Purpose – Celebrate Michael Buckland’s impressive legacy to LIS by showing his humanity, generosity and versatility.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is walk through a scientific career in LIS. Through personal anecdotes and life history and building upon Michael Buckland’s legacy, it summarises the author’s own work seen through the prism of her interactions with Buckland, leading to scholarly contributions articulating significant statements about the field of LIS as well as pointers to past relevant publications.

Findings – Michael Buckland has a unique way of putting an end to thorny LIS issues as well as being a documentator extraordinaire.

Originality/value – It is a personal account, as such cannot be evaluated through the classical norms of empirical research as there is no ground truth. This account shows how chance encounters with fellow scholars can have a lasting influence on one’s academic career as well as wider impact in a field.

Keywords Information science, Information studies, Documents, Bibliographies, History, Documentation

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1. A chance meeting in a hotel lobby or the power of serendipity

My first meeting with Michael confirms everything that has been said or written about the power of serendipity and fortuity. In 2008, I was in Montreal to attend the International ISKO Conference. I had booked into a hotel close to the campus where the conference was taking place and had come down to the lobby in the morning to complain about the lack of running water in the taps (yes you read correctly) and while I was engaged in a tense confrontation with the receptionist, a gentleman who was waiting at the lobby managed to successfully divert my attention from this vexing triviality by engaging me in conversation. When he learnt that I was a Library and Information Science (LIS) academic in France, he enquired whether I knew of Suzanne Briet. Having replied in the negative, he proceeded to give me a concise history of Briet there and then. I was amazed that this English gentleman whom I met fortuitously in a hotel lobby in Montreal knew more about a French pioneer of documentation and library science than myself given that I had done all my postgraduate studies and become an associate professor in this field in France. Little did I imagine then how that chance meeting was going to impact my academic career and inform my exploration of some of the most thorny and profound issues in LIS as the rest of this account of my interactions with *The August* [1] will reveal.

2. At the ‘epicentre of quantification’ in information science

My academic career began in the early 1990s after I obtained a PhD in Information Science (IS henceforth) and more precisely in a specialty called *Informatique documentaire* (automatic documentation) in the French Information and Communication landscape. The problem my PhD dissertation tackled was to define a linguistic formal model to extract meaningful text units from text corpora (usually noun phrases) which can then be used as input for various knowledge intensive tasks such as terminology modelling (i.e. building language resources like thesaurus, ontologies), information retrieval, trends detection in a scientific domain (*aka* text mining). The 10 years following my PhD’s defence were devoted to pursuing this line of research, developing methods and algorithms to automate different knowledge intensive tasks such as indexing, information retrieval, text mining and information visualisation.



Thus, the first two decades of my academic career were marked by formal and empirical methods which relied on models and methods from Natural Language processing, Statistics and Mathematics. This interdisciplinary field naturally led me to mix with the computational linguistics and digital libraries communities worldwide. I attended many COLING, LREC, ACM-sponsored conferences (ECIR) and took part in Information Retrieval (IR) challenges such as TREC (SanJuan *et al.*, 2008) and INEX (Ibekwe-SanJuan and SanJuan, 2008). This period was very productive and offered some very stimulating collaborations of which the highlight was my two-year research fellowship at the iSchool of Drexel in Philadelphia (Chen, Ibekwe-SanJuan *et al.*, 2010). Everything I understood about these fields was summed up in a 2007 book published in French entitled '*La Fouille de textes. Methods, outils et applications*' (Text Mining, methods, tools and applications) (Ibekwe-SanJuan, 2007).

Those were exciting times because they heralded the advent of the first-generation large scale search engines such as Altavista, Yahoo and Google. The scientific community in IR were providing the kernel research from which these private corporations built the algorithms and scaled them up to industrial applications.

However, something didn't sit well me in this body of research. For one thing, I could not ascertain whether the knowledge artefacts we were producing were of any real use because there were no real-world users! The few 'evaluations' of IR systems I took part in the INEX and TREC international challenges were done in very controlled laboratory conditions where the relevance judgements on retrieved documents were made by researchers who designed the IR systems themselves! It was Michael's 2012 seminal paper '*What kind of science can Information science be?*' (Buckland, 2012) that put its finger squarely on the faultline of these bodies of research and captured my unease. He began by asking provocatively 'Information retrieval is algorithmic, quantitative, and hugely useful, but is it scientific?'

His observation that information retrieval and bibliometrics were the '**epicentre{s} of quantification in information science**' [2] struck a chord. It was within these two epicentres of quantification that I had made my *debut* as a 'young' researcher. With hindsight, I now see this period as "the spring season" of my academic career when one is full of optimism, enthusiasm sometimes bordering on arrogance about the real import of one's research.

The problem, as Michael explained, was that 'Both bibliometrics and information retrieval bring methods developed in and for formal, (logical, well-defined) environments and use them on objects and in environments that are not formal, logical, or well-defined. This yields useful results but also necessarily compromised, incongruous processes' Buckland (2012).

This explained why, despite more than 50 years of publications, these fields had failed to provide a theoretically and methodologically satisfactory definition of 'relevance' because relevance is an elusive concept whose appreciation lies outside the formal models employed by IR systems. Indeed, the appreciation of relevance lies with the end user who ultimately determines whether a retrieved chunk of text or document answers his/her needs. We also know that the notion of relevance is fluid and evolves as the information search progresses and the user views several retrieved documents. Hence, despite the 'virtuoso calculations' deployed in IR and bibliometrics, their results remained shaky and subject to Popperian 'falsifiability' or Peircean 'fallibilism'. Minute changes in the corpus or in the indexing parameters and in the users making the relevance judgements can result in different results. However, I would underline that this fragility of results is consistent with the postulates of the empiricist epistemology upon which IR and bibliometrics theories, models and methods are based. Empiricism does not claim that laws and knowledge derived from its methods are universal or immutable. Rather, empiricism produces knowledge and results that are probable, depending on the 'representativity' (another problematic concept) of the input data. Therefore, its conclusions are always provisional and new occurrences can challenge previous conclusions. Notwithstanding their weaknesses, IR and bibliometrics did play major roles in galvanising the research and implementation of industrial applications of machine

learning models that enable people to find things on the web and to make predictions. IR and bibliometrics were the pioneering fields from which current day big data algorithms emerged and rose to prominence – for better or for worse!

How do you solve a problem like Michael?

3. Restoring fame to LIS sleeping beauties

The fame that Suzanne Briet now enjoys in LIS echoes the Biblical saying by Jesus himself: ‘*A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home*’ (Book of Matthew 13:57).

Aside from a few tributes paid to her in France by Sylvie [Fayet-Scribe \(2000\)](#) and later in a book which resulted from my chance meeting with Michael ([Ibekwe-SanJuan, 2012a, b, c](#)), Suzanne Briet’s legacy as the founder of the French documentation had been erased and replaced by a more contemporary academic narrative about the origins of the composite field called Information and Communication sciences, thus confirming Roland Barthe’s [3] observation that ‘*in order to be constituted, the origin myth needs to forget its own history*’ (Barthes 1957, p. 203, cited in [Jeanneret, 2007](#), p. 110). The consequence of this erasure was that the current generation of scholars, students and professionals in information documentation in France completed whole university cycles and degrees in information-documentation studies without ever encountering Briet’s name. The worldwide fame that Briet now enjoys is entirely due to foreigners, and to one foreigner in particular. Since the nineties, Michael put together a collection of historical resources on the discipline on his website in which Suzanne Briet featured prominently.

The international learned society in IS ASIST, published a tribute to Briet. [Ron Day and Martinet \(2006\)](#) published the English version of Briet’s “*Qu’est-ce que la documentation*” which ensured it an international audience. The Special Interest Group on the History and Foundations of Information Science (SIG F/HIS) of ASIST adopted the antelope as its logo, in honour of Briet. The antelope is the emblematic index whose different manifestations were used by Briet to illustrate the versatility of the notion of document. Briet’s manifesto book *What Is Documentation?* has been translated into several languages. If this book raised so much interest among LIS colleagues on the other side of the Atlantic, it is because they saw in it a visionary announcement of the transformation of the discipline from its initial library origins, to specialised documentation centres. Briet’s perception of documentation as a new speciality, had a strong social and cultural dimension – which helped to broaden the field of IS from a purely objectivist and systems driven focus to a more humanistic and user centred dimension. Briet insisted on the need for the profession to be proactive in the face of the ‘rhythms’ of technological change. In this sense, her vision was already a challenge to the traditional role of librarians and archivists as the sole custodians of knowledge.

Briet has now become a household name and her *What Is Documentation* has become a classic reading for LIS students worldwide. That Michael is a *documentator extraordinaire* whose archaeological diggings helped restore many long-forgotten pioneers to their glory is a well-known fact in the LIS universe.

Prophetically, other pioneers in other fields suffered the same fate as Briet before being restored by foreigners. The works of Abraham Moles (a specialist of Claude Shannon) and Pierre Schaeffer were better received abroad than in France ([Perriault, 2007](#)). The work of the sociologist Jacques Ellul has long been ‘ignored and rejected in France’, whereas it is celebrated in the United States. The University of California Berkeley (the very institution where Michael was and from where he made Briet famous!) created a journal in his honour – ‘[The Ellul Forum](#)’ – published by a learned society dedicated to him, the ‘International Jacques Ellul Society’ ([Vitalis, 2007](#)).

4. Navigating a thicket of thorns and nettles

My chance meeting with Michael in 2008 also coincided with a period of professional watershed moment. As I sought to ‘rise in the ranks’ and become a full professor, the

prerequisite was to write and defend a *Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches* (HDR), a post-PhD diploma which officially qualifies one to supervise PhD students in France. I already possessed a PhD since 1997 and had been an Associate Professor for twelve years. This HDR needed to be done with a 'guarantor' who is typically a Full professor that will guide the applicant through the process and at the end, convene a jury and organise a public defence. If the applicant is received (usually a formality), he/she will begin applying for full professor positions in any French university with vacancies in the relevant field. Thus, the HDR acted as an effective filter to admit those that are desired as Full professors or keep out those deemed unworthy of the status. The dominant ideology in the discipline had become very hostile to anything truly scientific in a positivist, quantitative and empirical sense. My formal quantitative research in information processing and informetric was deemed by the dominant ideology as borderline or outside the field and belonging to computer science.

I told Michael of my project to do my HDR and of the opposition I was encountering as he had some knowledge of how the academia and professorship system worked in France. He imparted pearls of wisdom by counselling diplomacy in how I worded my HDR *memoire* as people who want to further their own ideologies and interests will not welcome any criticism or ideas that threatened their stranglehold. His advice was spot on as the road to obtain my HDR became littered with thorns and thickets. However, I persevered and eventually defended the diploma in 2010 and after more nettles and thorns, became a Full Professor in 2014.

De facto, Michael had become my unofficial mentor with whom I discussed important LIS topics and asked for guidance on any scientific project or initiative that I planned to engage in.

5. Comparative epistemology of information and communication theories

When in 2011, I obtained a small funding from the Institute of Communication Studies (Institut des Sciences de la Communication du CNRS-ISCC) under the aegis of the French National Research Center (CNRS) to study the different conceptions of information and communication, I naturally approached Michael to be my co-PI as well as Thomas Dousa, a then PhD student at Illinois university who was interested in all things epistemological. Together, we formed an international trio of co-PIs discussing the conceptions of information and communication and how this impacted the epistemology of science. While interaction with Michael was restricted to email exchanges, it was always a delight to wake up every morning to find his answers to my mails the previous day given the nine hour time difference between France and the west coast of the United States. This research project culminated in the organisation of a colloquium at my home institution, then Jean Moulin University in Lyon. Michael contributed immensely in fleshing out and structuring my thoughts about how to conduct this research project. He made very insightful additions to the text of our call for participation to the colloquium that made it compelling to our prospective speakers and ensured the success of what became the international colloquium on the 'Comparative Epistemology of the concepts of information and communication in scientific disciplines' (*Epistemologie Comparative des concepts d'information et de communication, aka EPICIC*). Under his guidance, I was able to put together a strong cast of speakers which included Luciano Floridi, Professor and Chair in Philosophy of Information University of Oxford and the UNESCO Chair of Information and Computer Ethics and Fellow of Stokes Cross College; Søren Brier, Professor of the Semiotics of Information, Cognition and Communication at Department of International Studies of Culture and Communication, Copenhagen Business School who had just written a seminal book *Cybersemiotics, why information is not enough*; Birger Hjørland, then Professor at the Royal School of LIS, Copenhagen as well as other LIS scholars from other European countries. The colloquium was held in April 2011 at Jean Moulin University in Lyon where I was an Associate professor. It was without doubt, one of the highlights of my academic career.

The colloquium resulted in the publication of a beautiful chapter book entitled *Theories of Information, Communication and Knowledge. A Multidisciplinary approach* (Ibekwe-SanJuan & Thomas Dousa eds. 2013) published in the Springer's *Series Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* and which gathered the contributions of speakers at the colloquium, augmented by the contributions of other reputed researchers from within and outside LIS. The rationale for the publication of the book was that while no consensus existed on a common definition of the concepts of information and communication, few could reject the hypothesis that information – whether perceived as an ‘object’ or as a ‘process’ – is a precondition for knowledge. If information is a pre-condition for knowledge acquisition, giving an account of how knowledge is acquired should impact our comprehension of information and communication as concepts. While much had been written on the definition of these two concepts, relatively few researchers had sought to establish explicit links between differing theoretical conceptions of them and the underlying epistemological stances. What our book offered was a multidisciplinary and comparative exploration of how information and communication are perceived in different disciplines and how this affected theories of knowledge.

How do you solve a problem like Michael?

6. A pseudo-difference that makes no difference [4]

The next problem I tackled had been a proverbial thorn in my flesh in my struggle to defend my HDR: there was a shared idea held by many professors who had attained prominence in France in the Information-Communication Sciences (ICS) that the anglophone conception of IS was so different from theirs as to constitute different fields. This argument was often used by Faculty recruitment committees and by the national body whose function it was to qualify potential candidates for Faculty positions to reject those whose strands of research had a quantitative, computational or formalisation bent. The general attitude was to consider research on information extraction, modelling, visualisation, information retrieval, information systems as not belonging to the field of ICS and those who ventured into those fields did so at their own peril.

Given my multicultural background, I decided to investigate this claim of the supposed ‘*exception française*’ of IS. For four years (approximately between 2008 and 2012), I embarked on an extensive reading of the foundational texts of the discipline in both geographic and linguistic areas. What I found appeared in several papers that I published around the same time: (1) an article in JASIST entitled *The French conception of information science. Une exception française?*; (2) a paper at the ASIST’s 75th Anniversary History Perspective in The history of ASIS&T and Information Science and Technology worldwide entitled *Whither Information Science in France?* and (3) lastly a monograph in French, *La science de l’information. Origines, théories et paradigmes*. Throughout my exploration of the French and anglophone conceptions of IS, Michael’s counselling, guiding and tactful advice were key elements which structured my thinking and writing as I often wanted to move at supersonic speed. He sent me very relevant suggestions of readings and graciously undertook to read various drafts of my manuscripts including the final proof of my 2012 book in French (he of course reads French fluently). What my findings amounted to was that the affirmed differences between the French and Anglophone conceptions of IS were mainly a result of political, ideological and institutional ground staking. The composite field of ICS within which IS is housed is colonised by communication and media studies which account for about 85% of the student and faculty population. Hence, communication and media studies scholars determine the centre of gravity of the field and decide who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ at any given time. The few IS professors who had been admitted into the elite circle of gatekeepers were only too eager to show their allegiance to the dominant ideology by pulling up the ladder after them. Some went beyond what the dominant ideology expected by

adopting an even more narrow interpretation of the boundaries of the ICS field. Using the HDR qualification and recruitment processes as leverage, candidates IS scholars knocking at the door of Full professorship were vetted or barred. But, once the layers of national, institutional and linguistic idiosyncrasies had been peeled off, at the rock bottom, the French and anglophone conceptions of IS stemmed from the same pioneers, used the same concepts and ideas, relied on the same major theories and epistemologies. As my 2012 JASIST paper summed it up:

The French conception of Information science is often compared to the Anglophone one which is perceived as different and rooted mainly in Shannon's mathematical theory of communication. While there is such thing as a French conception of information science, this conception is not totally divorced from the Anglophone one. Unbeknown to researchers from the two geographical and cultural regions, they share similar conceptions of the field and invoke similar theoretical foundations, in particular the socio-constructivist theory. There is also a convergence of viewpoint on the dual nature of information science, i.e., the fact that it is torn between two competing paradigms – objectivist or systems driven and subjectivist or human oriented. Technology is another area where a convergence of viewpoint is noticeable: scholars from both geographic and cultural zones display the same suspicion towards the role of technology and of computer science. It is therefore misleading to continue to uphold the view that the Anglosaxon information science is essentially objectivist and *technicist* while the French conception is essentially social or cultural and rooted in the humanities [5].

Prior to the publications of my findings, I participated in some panels to discuss these issues. The panel '*Re-Positioning Information Science*' [6] chaired by Michael during the ASIST 2010 annual meeting pondered the differences and similarities between the conceptions of IS not only across regional and geographic zones but also in terms of the very nature of the discipline. Michael suggested that IS is concerned with cultural engagement and is what Herb Simon called a 'science of the artificial'. In 2014, I chaired a second panel entitled '*Pluri, Multi-, Trans- Meta- and Interdisciplinary nature of LIS. Does it really matter?*' whose object is in its title.

As one of the panelists, Michael's contribution was as pragmatic as it was trenchant. He argued that IS is more of a '*field or profession rather than a discipline*' and needed '*to be methodologically versatile*' and ended with one of his famous quips that '*Problems are not disciplines, but disciplines can be problematic*'. Time to move on!

7. Epistemological purity or impurity: Another scientific quibble

Behind the 'disciplinarity' debate lurked another *disputatio*. Around that time, some LIS and Knowledge organisation (KO) theorists had expressed concerns that our field seemed driven primarily by practical applications and professional practices. They stressed the need for research in the field to be more theoretically motivated, lest it continue to be perceived not as a scientific field but simply as a set of techniques used to solve problems. This led to calls for LIS scholars to make explicit the epistemological assumptions underlying their research and to incorporate philosophy into LIS curricula.

One specific aspect of these debates was about the merit of epistemological purity, i.e. the requirement to adhere to one epistemological theory when doing a piece of research or professional work. When I tried to apply or confront this principle to my own empirical research practices, it proved to be unrealistic or downright impossible.

To further debate this issue, I chaired a panel entitled '*Uncovering Epistemological Assumptions underlying Research in Information Studies*' [7] during the ASIST 2013 annual meeting. With Thomas Dousa who had defended his PhD by then, we subjected the principle of epistemological purity to an exercise of falsifiability *à la* Karl Popper or to fallibilism *à la* Charles Sanders Peirce. In essence, we attempted a systematic self-reflexive exercise to

uncover the epistemological assumptions and methodologies that we implicitly or explicitly deployed to conduct research in the fields of natural language processing, text mining and information visualisation which I had been working on for about two decades. Thomas Dousa applied the same exercise to the field of knowledge organisation, in particular to Julius Otto Kaiser's method of Systematic Indexing (SI) and Brian Vickery's method of facet analysis (FA) for document classification which he had studied at length. Both our findings showed that researchers developing methods to solve a specific research problem, be it theoretical or empirical, often make use of assumptions from different epistemological theories. In other words, to conduct a given piece of research, scientists will borrow theories and methods from more than one epistemological tradition, at different stages of realisation of the work. This is all the more true given that real-life problems do not come draped in the apparel of one epistemological theory. They are complex. The claim of epistemological purity is also unrealistic given that the boundaries between epistemological theories are blurred because some were propounded at the same periods and share many common points. Empiricism and critical rationalism can agree on the insufficiency of reason alone as the means of knowledge acquisition and the necessity to take into account experience and observation in science. Other epistemological theories are historically derived from one another: positivism and cognitivism are both offspring of rationalism; cognitivism is fundamentally a positivist doctrine which, in methodological terms, leads to the preference for the physical paradigm. Historicism, constructivism, systemic theory and complexity theories all share some basic common postulates and assumptions. Through two case studies, we demonstrated that in scientific research especially of an empirical nature, epistemological and methodological eclecticism was the norm rather than the exception. The different stages of research in information retrieval and topic mapping show that they bring into interplay pragmatism, empiricism, positivism with a dose of hermeneutics. In KO, Julius Otto Kaiser's Systematic Indexing (SI) and Brian Vickery's method of facet analysis (FA) combined classical features of rationalism with elements of empiricism and pragmatism. These findings were published in two ISKO conference proceedings ([Ibekwe-SanJuan and Dousa, 2013](#) and [Dousa and Ibekwe-SanJuan, 2014](#)).

How do you
solve a
problem like
Michael?

When I told Michael what we were grappling with and what our findings were, his response was as compelling as it was memorable. It came in the shape of a fable which went thus:

Once upon a time there was a man who had a terrible pain in his eye

So he went to see his doctor.

The doctor saw the inflammation and gave him some ointment.

But the eye continued to be painful.

So the man went back to the doctor.

The doctor looked again,

And saw that there was a splinter in the eye that needed surgical removal.

He told the man. 'A little surgery will solve the problem. It is easy to do.

I have done it a hundred times.

But I cannot do it in this case, because I started with ointment and to change now to surgery would be methodologically impure.'

Moral: Practical problems need pragmatic solutions.

Or in other words: *'I tend to use whatever methods or theories that work!'*

This moral is also echoed in one of his articles in a more scholarly language: *'Major social needs are typically complex. Whoever undertakes to try to solve them needs to be methodologically versatile in a way that is inadequately captured by 'interdisciplinary'*. (Buckland, 2012).

Michael's concise often tongue-in-cheek humour provided an unassailable way of ending fruitless scientific quibbles. While his fable delighted me by its vindication of what our study had revealed about how research worked in practice rather than in theory, I was loath to use it as scientific 'proof' of the normality of epistemological eclecticism. As luck would have it, a *bona fide* scientific vindication was to come! As I pursued my readings on this 'problem', I chanced upon Tom Wilson's 2008 paper *'The epistemological dimension of Information Science and its implication on Library and Archival Education'* which began with a quotation of Albert Einstein himself grappling with this very dilemma. In essence, Albert Einstein argued that the scientist doing research on the ground (by that I understand empirical?) cannot afford the luxury of epistemological systematicity because practical constraints placed upon the scientific enterprise by external conditions are incompatible with the idealistic and theoretical quest for epistemological purity. The paragraph merits being cited in full:

The reciprocal relationship of epistemology and science is of noteworthy kind. They are dependent upon each other. Epistemology without contact with science becomes an empty scheme. Science without epistemology is-insofar as it is thinkable at all-primitive and muddled. However, no sooner has the epistemologist, who is seeking a clear system, fought his way through to such a system, than he is inclined to interpret the thought-content of science in the sense of his system and to reject whatever does not fit into his system.

The scientist, however, cannot afford to carry his striving for epistemological systematic that far. He accepts gratefully the epistemological conceptual analysis; but the external conditions, which are set for him by the facts of experience, do not permit him to let himself be too much restricted in the construction of his conceptual world by the adherence to an epistemological system. He therefore must appear to the systematic epistemologist as a type of unscrupulous opportunist: he appears as realist insofar as he seeks to describe a world independent of the acts of perception; as idealist insofar as he looks upon the concepts and theories as the free inventions of the human spirit (not logically derivable from what is empirically given); as positivist insofar as he considers his concepts and theories justified only to the extent to which they furnish a logical representation of relations among sensory experiences. He may even appear as Platonist or Pythagorean insofar as he considers the viewpoint of logical simplicity as an indispensable and effective tool of his research. – *Albert Einstein. In Schlüpp, Paul. Arthur. Albert Einstein, philosopher-scientist.* New York: Tudor Publishers, 1949 (pp. 683–684) cited in [Wilson \(2008\)](#).

Q.E.D (Quod Erat Demonstrandum)!

Time to move on to the next thorny issue!

8. For the European Origins of LIS, dial 'SOS Michael'

My readings and cogitations on the history and foundations of LIS had identified a gap which I thought needed to be filled. While several monographs and articles had been written on how LIS emerged in different parts of the world, in particular in the United States (USA) and in the United Kingdom (UK) and some histories had been written about the emergence of LIS in non-anglophone European countries, they were published in languages other than English which made them difficult to access for an international audience. Also, these previous publications on the history and foundations of LIS focused on single countries. Cross-national studies of LIS were rare, especially concerning non-anglophone countries. The ASIST History Research award that I received in 2015 enabled me to embark on a book project aimed at filling this gap. The intention was to provide the first in a series of cross-national histories on the emergence

How do you
solve a
problem like
Michael?

of LIS in non-anglophone European countries. The idea was to produce a book in two parts: the first part which I was to write was to be devoted to a comparative study of the historic origins of LIS in different European countries; the second part was to dwell on the theoretical and epistemological foundations of LIS building on the second part of my 2012 French book *'La Science de l'information'*. Such an ambitious project required that I work with a second scholar. Having found a co-author and an editor, a contract was signed for the book delivery in about 18 months. From the onset, the book was beset by many delays. Finally, when in 2018 the editor pressed me for a firm manuscript publication date, my co-author finally threw in the towel and dropped out of the project. I found myself in a quandary: my part on the comparative history of the origins of LIS in Europe was written up to about 80% based on the field work I had done but the second part, on the theoretical foundations of LIS, had to be abandoned. The dilemma was then to determine whether what I had written was publishable on its own as an entire monograph. Who did I turn to? I sent Michael an SOS mail asking for his help and possible collaboration as co-author. His reply came swiftly and began with a very calming *'Don't panic'* followed up by several pearls of wisdom. In essence, he told me that publishers were 'all too accustomed to such developments and were less worried about when the date is than with having a date they can depend on, whenever that might be and that a good manuscript will find a publisher when it is ready'.

Fortified by this advice, I was able to renegotiate the structure of the book with the editor around my part only. A new deadline was set for within a year and I buckled down to work furiously on it.

Throughout that stress-filled year of 2018, I worked on finishing the manuscript while also doing all the other things academics do (teaching, supervising students) as well as contending with turbulent life events. Michael was always literally at the end of the Internet cable, across the Atlantic, offering advice and concrete help. He read drafts of my book, answered my never-ending questions about European pioneers, events, people and concepts. The amount of help he rendered to me warranted that he be co-author of the book, a role I offered him. But following his legendary generosity in not taking credit for all his contributions, he declined the offer.

The book was finally published in the spring of 2019 under the title *'European Origins of Library and Information Science'*.

It was an imperfect book but it was the best I could do given the challenges of writing a historic account of the emergence of a field in several countries and from materials written in languages one does not understand. My hope was that although imperfect, this book will inspire others to write historical accounts of the emergence of LIS in their own countries. This is exactly what happened next.

9. Redial Michael for the institutional contexts of emergence of LIS schools

As we pursued our discussion on the need to account for the historic and institutional contexts of the emergence of LIS in various parts of the world, Michael came up with a new idea: that of writing short accounts of events, of official strategies and tactics adopted by the people who set up LIS departments and schools in different countries. He argued that these written histories will have a pedagogical as well as archival virtue and will shed light on the current peculiarities and differences observed in iSchools across the world. Rather than embarking on a lengthy and unwieldy volume publication which may take years to materialise, such short accounts can be produced in a reasonable time frame and will be more interesting to read too. Around that time, I had become the Editor in chief of the journal *Education for Information*, and it made sense that this journal should publish these short accounts.

Michael also suggested many resourceful LIS scholars in different European countries who either witnessed these historic events or had been long enough in the field to be able to write such accounts.

I contacted the scholars he suggested and most agreed to write these accounts which gave rise to the *'Institutional Contexts of Emergence of LIS Series'* that I began publishing in the journal. Naturally, I invited Michael to write the introduction to the series which he did graciously. Here is an excerpt:

Most education for information takes place through a programme administered by a school, commonly a department within a university. (. . .) Schools in each country are influenced by the traditions, circumstances, and policies of that country and so schools within a single country have some features in common. But each individual school's situation is also and importantly a product of local conditions which reflect, for example, the institutional history and the evolving priorities of the parent institution and of funding agencies. For that reason a series of case-studies is needed to build a corpus of documented experience. To meet this need *Education for Information* has decided to feature a series of articles on schools and their institutional contexts. (. . .) Authors are encouraged to describe their institutional context, to describe significant developments (for good or for bad), to reflect on the tactics, strategies, and circumstances that were favorable or unfavorable, to speculate on what might have been done differently, and to suggest what could be learned that might be of wider interest. Failures and disappointments are as instructive as successes. Innovations that are successful in one institutional context may be unwise or not feasible in another. Some thirty years ago when a few schools were discontinued in the United States, there were lessons to be learned, but discourse about them was mostly simplistic, erroneous, and overly generalized. In fact each case was uniquely different and the influential factors were quite varied. One lesson was clear, however, catering to professional constituencies is important but not enough. Neglecting local institutional imperatives is perilous. [Buckland \(2019\)](#).

To date, five accounts on institutional contexts of emergence of LIS have been published for the following countries: Norway, United Kingdom, Poland, Austria and Portugal. It is an ongoing series that publishes such accounts when they are ready.

10. Racism, fascism, authoritarianism: What does it have to do with LIS?

As the world first witnessed this unprecedented event of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of all human activity, the world also witnessed a rude awakening with the racist murder of George Floyd in the US. That this brutal form of racism can still happen in broad daylight for all to see in 2020 was a wakeup call for me. As a woman of colour living in the West, this evil has been eating away at the self-esteem of people like me. As an academic, I felt that I had a moral duty to use my research and teaching to do something about it. When Michael contacted me in 2022 because he had unearthed some hitherto unknown text by Robert Pagès and was wondering about Pagès' links with the founding fathers of the current day Information and Communication sciences in France, I told him that I was no longer digging the research soil for French forgotten pioneers but had decided to turn my research efforts on racism. I thought he may not have much to say on this topic but I was wrong. He imparted to me that he had just read an interesting book by Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (2018), which dealt with the rise of Christian fascism in Russia under Putin. The book explained how authoritarian regimes, fascist and racist ideologies abhorred facts because facts interfered with and constrained their simplified narrative of 'them' vs 'us'. In essence, for fascism, racism and authoritarian regimes to thrive, 'Facts must be prevented, criminalized, undermined by confusing counternarratives, and its purveyors eliminated' [8]. Michael ended this exegesis with this quote:

As Robert Pagès put it nicely in 1948: 'La documentation est à la culture ce que la machinerie est à l'industrie {Documentation is to culture what machinery is to industry}.' That insight combined with Snyder's book is the best illumination I know on how racism and information science are related.

This analysis was consistent with what the world is witnessing. The aggressive attacks on facts and on truth are the necessary conditions for populist and authoritarian regimes to seize power. Putin falsely framed his aggressive empire rebuilding in Ukraine as a 'special

operation' aimed at rooting out Nazis and fascists, which incidentally is what he is. Trump's victory and term at the presidency of the most powerful country in the world was founded on an erasure of facts and truth. This has empowered and emboldened climate deniers, racism deniers and white supremacist ideologues. We are now witnessing the advent of a 'post-truth' society where people seeking power can shamelessly base their dangerous assertions and acts on falsehood and still get elected. Their campaigns on social media platform have successfully upstaged mainstream media industry and journalists, librarians and information specialists committed to the ethics of fact verification. In Europe, populist and extreme right-wing ideologies riding on the wave of misinformation have either gained power (Italy and Hungary) or are at the doors of power (France, Poland, Sweden).

How do you
solve a
problem like
Michael?

The parallel with racism is evident for me: for it to be so pervasive and entrenched across so many centuries, facts about Blacks and indigenous peoples' histories and civilisations had to be suppressed, distorted and obliterated in history books and manuals by the West. Anyone seeking to re-establish them is either denigrated, discredited or if too influential, assassinated. Although publications establishing such facts exist, they have been deliberately ignored in western curricula or banned, as the current demonisation of Critical Race Theory in the US shows. Sadly, these facts and information have also been erased in African countries because what slavery and colonisation achieved was to establish the hegemony of western civilisation as the model to emulate. Thus, formerly enslaved or colonised peoples have been deprived of the history of their own past and heritage, as most of the cultural artefacts were stolen and reside in western museums, arts galleries and in private collections.

As the custodians and 'preservers' of knowledge artefacts through classification and indexing schemes, the LIS and KO communities ought to be concerned about the concerted attacks on factual information by populist and authoritarian regimes. Data, facts and the information they convey are the building blocks of societal and scientific knowledge which we all need in order to thrive in our environments and safeguard democracy.

11. Epilogue

As I come to the end of this walk through my correspondences and interactions with *The August*, it becomes clear that I have known Michael for the better part of my academic career. As the reader may have perceived, I owe him an enormous debt. He has been a significant influence in my research trajectory, present at every major goal and milestone I reached. It is no exaggeration to say that everything I wrote on the history and foundations of LIS benefitted, in some way, from the very rich exchanges I had with him.

Michael has a very unique way of solving thorny information problems. His ability for deep archaeological foraging into the distant and dusty past of LIS pioneers is legendary. He usually unearths nuggets of information that the natives of the pioneer's country are ignorant of. In 2017, his diggings around French document theorists led him to discover that Briet's 1951 famous example of 'antelope in the zoo as a document' had been preceded by similar examples in the 1947 master's thesis of Robert Pagès who had been Briet's student. Pagès considered that 'a Gorilla in a cage' was an example of a document. Hence, a new puzzle: was Pagès inspired by Briet's teachings when he used those examples in 1947 or did Briet take inspiration from her students' master's *mémoire* in her later *manifesto* of 1951?

Finally, to end on a lighter note, I dedicate to Michael, my own adaptation of the song from the famed musical "*Sound of Music*", but readers be warned: I make no claim to alexandrine rhyme:

He'd outpace any historian or journalist

On the history of documents

JD

Of ideas and of events
With dogged determination
Raising long forgotten pioneers
From their dusty repose
His *amour* for French pioneers is legendary
Under his powerful searchlight
Document pioneers cannot escape
Until all mystery is solved
Betwixt teacher Briet and pupil Pagès
Who inspired whom?
Such is now the new mystery
That Michael will surely solve
Oh, that such diggings may upturn
The pantheon of enthroned pioneers
How do you solve a problem like Michael?
How do you catch a stream and pin it down?
How do you find a word that means Michael?
He's a mentor and inspirer!
A documentator extraordinaire
A formidable investigator!
His tongue-in-cheek dry wit
A heritage of his tiny British Isles
Sealed the fate of many scientific quibbles
What a unique combination!
Oh, how do you solve a problem like Michael?
What will LIS do without him?

Notes

1. Michael, *the August*, hails from the same town (Wantage then in Berkshire) as Alfred the Great (849 AD), the fifth son of Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons. August refers to someone or something that is dignified and impressive. It is my own tongue-in-cheek nickname for our esteemed colleague to whom this *festschrift* is dedicated.
2. Emphasis is mine.
3. Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a French philosopher literary theorist, essayist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician.
4. In reference to Gregory Bateson's attempt to define information as "*a difference that makes a difference*" (Bateson G. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. 1972)

5. Ibekwe-SanJuan (2012a, b, c), The French conception of Information Science: *une exception française?* *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*, 2012, DOI: 10.1002/asi.
6. Available online at <https://archivesic.ccsd.cnrs.fr/hal-00635290/>
7. Available online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262151587_Uncovering_Epistemological_Assumptions_Underlying_Research_in_Information_Studies
8. Quoting Michael's private e-mail correspondance.

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