

Early History of a Francophone Bi-Science “Information and Communication Sciences” and its Society in France

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ABSTRACT

As new academic disciplines, information and communication sciences, like any new discipline, have faced difficulties integrating into the broader scientific community. In France, they have ultimately settled into the category of interdisciplinary fields. Their binary structure — information science and communication science—has proven to be somewhat unequal. The scientific community and the journal that represents them also reflect this perception.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the seventies, in their academic expression, information and communication sciences were classified by the French Ministry of Education, for the purposes of recruiting and promoting academics, within the Humanities group of the National Council of Universities (CNU). Information and communication thus became, on the margins of the humanities, two still somewhat vague concepts, predominantly physical and social

sciences. Despite a bleak past in the camps of Political oppression exercised by the French Ministry of Information (sic) until 1974 and in those of the psychoanalytic diktats of communication gurus, the new potentials held by these concepts were beginning to be perceived.

They relied on the formidable rise of media and information databases, a new field of application for computer science and telecommunications. But an academic discipline encompassing them found little favor with literary

specialists and little place among the traditional disciplines. In 1982, thanks to the political upheaval brought about by progressive forces, academic disciplines were also shaken. And alongside the monolithic blocks of traditional, less open-minded disciplines (Cf. hierarchy of sciences of the philosopher Auguste COMTE), the new group of interdisciplinary disciplines emerged. It was within this group that we managed to place "information and communication sciences" alongside "education and training sciences", "epistemology and history of science and technology", "regional cultures and languages", and "sciences and techniques of physical and sporting activities". "Scandal!" exclaimed some. And it took the tenacity of the Ministry of Education to calm everyone, angry at having to leave the fold of the Humanities. But it was not possible to create, as is customary in other academic departments, a sub-section of information science and a sub-section of communication science that would have taken into account the specific nature of the two fields. The quantitative dominance exerted by communication professionals and the scientific invisibility of documentation professionals prevented a balanced development of activities in information science. It is worth recalling, for example, that within the French Society for Information and Communication Sciences (SFSIC), during national congresses, information science was allotted a brief session at the end of the congress, valiantly organized by the head of the cancer information database, "Cancernet." The dual statute of the discipline "Information and Communication Sciences (SIC)" is therefore an anomaly in the global scientific landscape. Everywhere else, and especially in the English-speaking world, information science and communication science are distinct.

II. RESEARCH

Thus, it is the "info-com" specialists, experts in communication, who have dominated and continue to dominate the field. The "info-doc" specialists, experts in information systems and documentation, have received little attention, probably due to their decidedly professional and less scientific approach. Consequently, the creation of the Info-Doc master's programs in 1990 did not generate much enthusiasm within the Info-Com community. It took the proactive policy of the Ministry of Education to stimulate, within the framework of research programs, the creation of research teams, the organization of summer

schools and Anglo-French forums in information science, the support for the organization of conferences, and the launch in 1985 of the first electronic journal in information science, the "Journal-*Revue de Science de l'information*".

"Info-Com" studies benefited from the aura of a number of gurus and the vogue for "communication." These were philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, economists, etc., who were highly visible in the media and carried a strong ideological weight¹. In a prolific body of work, ranging in quality from popular science books to scholarly articles, one can observe the epistemological contortions of those who advocate combining the words "Info" and "Com." For example, those who suggested that it was appropriate to henceforth use the phrase "Information-Communication" with a dash (-) and not a hyphen (—). What an audacious conceptualization of the epistemological status of the concept info-com! Ten years later, they still lamented that the use of the hyphen was far from widespread, the confusion with the hyphen persisting. Other contortions of sociologists lacking technical expertise and fearful of communication technologies include those concerning "social use," a redundant concept, a pretext for verbose literature. Why not simply "use"? Since use is always a social construct, as they themselves acknowledge.

III. TRAINING

What about professional training in both sectors? Librarian and information specialist training remained very traditional. Let's not forget that the librarian is called a "conservateur". Information science has little influence, as it was ignored by educational leaders, who were first trained in cataloging at an old school named ENSB (Ecole Nationale des Bibliothèques). We encountered some lengthy difficulties in

¹ The National Council of Universities decides on individual measures relating to the qualification, recruitment, and career of university professors and lecturers. The elections of its members are held on union lists strongly politicized on the left (SNESUP-FSU, SGEN-CFDT) and on the right (INTERSYNDICALE SUP'RECHERCHE, Qualité de la Science Française). In addition, there are members appointed by the government.

incorporating information science (SI) into its name and curriculum. From ENSB, it became ENSSIB, the National School of Information Science and Libraries. In France, libraries, documentation centers, and museums are still not as well-regarded for their accessibility as Anglo-Saxon libraries and museums (perhaps a lingering memory of the nightmarish library in "The Name of the Rose" by Umberto Eco). As for journalism training, fourteen programs are recognized by the profession. Their model is quite technical, "the medium is the message," and the theoretical component is too limited.

IV. LEARNED SOCIETY

Let's now leave the academic sphere and turn our attention to the learned society that represents information and communication sciences: the French Society for Information and Communication Sciences (SFSIC). Founded in France in the 1970s by three academics, it aimed to represent this new scientific field within the Humanities. Since 1974, it has brought together those involved in teaching and research in Information and Communication Sciences (SIC). As an association and learned society, it supports and promotes the work of this scientific community through its scientific events, publications, and its support for initiatives developed within the disciplines of Information Science and Communication Science.

While admittedly very literary in its early days, it was also quite conservative. The highly militaristic hierarchy of the academic ranks, some first-class, others second-class, was replicated identically in the learned society. At the annual congress, the elections of the Society's officers were conducted according to this framework. Hence, the astonishment of new members, such as those from disciplines where scientific democracy was practiced and where scientific expertise transcended hierarchical barriers. This provided a striking example of the university mandarin-like disciplines still at work in the French academic world. And at work also in an institute like CELSA and, of course, in the CNU (National Council of Universities), both headed, in the eighties, by a reserve officer.

The congresses were the Society's primary scientific activity. Since 1978, eighteen congresses have been held. Being francophone and therefore regional, their international impact has remained

limited. The Society also published, for many years, since 1978, a newsletter, "La Lettre d'inforcom," which has since become "Les Cahiers de la SFSIC." Before finally launching, in 2012, 34 years after its founding moments, a scientific journal, the "Revue Française des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication," in French. A small, regional journal, like the science of the same name.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in France, no major information science, no major communication science, no international journal in information science, and no international journal in communication science. But rather, "provincial" sciences and a "provincial" journal, as Eugene Garfield, president of the "Institute for Scientific Information," pointed out in 1976 in the journal "La Recherche," in a provocative article concerning French science, "Is French Science Too Provincial?"

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