Yves-Francois Le Coadic Oral History Interview
Interviewed by Michel Menou

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MM: Mister Le Coadic, how did you become interested in information science?

LC: My interest in information science came when I was in charge in the Ministry of Education, in the '70s, of Policy Research in the University of Quebec in Canada. If one defines science policy, a priority area of research, to assign critics and manpower to recruit, it is a concern about the information produced by and for the science involved. Its communication and its use. This is the problem of information science.

MM: Yes. And could you tell us what were the most important steps in your career in information science?

LC: Two steps are important for me in my career. The first step was my stay in… as research assistant in '78 in Case Western Reserve University, at the School of Library Science, at the Center for Documentation and Communication Research at Case. I had a mentor, William Goffman, and I had the opportunity to talk with Jesse Shera and Phyllis VanOrden. During this stay, the United States allowed me to meet them. As a second step--I mean for my orientation in information science--was my stay at the Department of Information Science at the City University of London, which reinforced my commitment in information science. A thesis in '80, on structure and dynamics and information systems confirmed that commitment and allowed me to start in '82, a teaching career at the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers in Paris. And after twelve years, summer school in information science, and organizing research seminar with the R and D department of the British Library, I got a job offer as full time professor in

information science in the Conservatoire. So the two steps are the states, Cleveland, and London University, which determined my engagement in information science.

MM: As a starting point, but later on…

LC: Later on?

MM: So, in your opinion, what did you contribute to the field of information science?

LC: Three ways, I think. First, in France… France was far behind, academically speaking, from the UK or the US, and…

MM: When was that, exactly?

LC: In '82. France was far behind. And my first contribution, I think, was to organize a political science program in information science at the academic level in France. At the time, in France, you had only two professional schools in the field of documentation. At the University level, there was not any department or research group in information science. So this program was resolutely interdisciplinary, and we organized the field, mobilizing organization in IT, in the IT sector, telecommunications sector, as well as in the social sciences and humanities sector. Its founding has led to the creation of a new method [?] of recruitment of university teachers in France in information science, in communication science. This program created a lot of jobs in this discipline, and we established university courses in the first, second, and third cycle in the university courses. I published a book for the Francophone world on information science, because I discovered that a lot of people in France were ignoring totally the concept of information science. A book on information science, the use and user of information, the need for information, and statistics and mathematics for information.

The other level, more technical, was a creation of the first…actually journals in French, on using the video text mode. You know, it was an experiment, a technical experiment…

MM: [inaudible?]

LC: Yes. And we were working in collaboration with OCLC. We [?] by the experiment, and by planned experiments in the UK, too. This is three. First… I mean, we were the third experiment in [?] journal in the world. But in the medium of video text mode [?]. Okay, the three ways, science policy program information science… Well, publishing reference books for the Francophone world, and creating a [?] journal… in French, in video text mode. Okay?

MM: Yes. And, in this course of life, could you tell us of colleagues who you feel were especially important in the making of your own vision of your work?

LC: Well, it's… I mean it's fully correlated with the two steps I spoke about before. I mean there's the US colleagues and the UK colleagues. The US I told you about; colleagues from the states. For the British colleagues, my colleagues were coming from the City University and the University College of London. The City University, at the time, the Department of Information Science, was directed by [Bob?], who welcomed me at the time. I spent a lot of time with Nick Belkin and Steve [?]; Nick and Steve both have roots, and [?], too, at University College in London.

MM: So you are visiting there, or…

LC: I am. Every year, I spent about one to two weeks in Britain, in the city, using the facilities of the city, the library and the facilities I was unable to find in France. The situation was very poor. Okay?

MM: Fine. More generally, what would you consider the most important achievements or misachievements of information science? What is the significance of information science in the overall scientific panorama?

LC: Well, I think it's the scientific studies of information. When I say scientific studies, I mean a rigorous way of studying information. And I think, as presenting the discipline as library science, documentation science, we are not addressing a real scientific object with real scientific models. So I think…what my perspective on this achievement of information science is to give a very rigorous way of studying information.

MM: What is information as a subject of scientific investigation?

LC: [laughs] Well, I think information… Some of my colleagues from the… I've joined some colleagues from the US and the UK... In England this was a group about the definition of information as the materialization of knowledge on the different support; the first support being paper, and presently, electronic support. You have a world of knowledge in different sectors, and in order to communicate this knowledge, you need to transform information with different tools and systems. So, it's my definition of information. Related to communication, and to technical support as… So, information is knowledge and support.

MM: Right. Embedded in particular carriers…

LC: Embedded…yes.

MM: Alright. You have mentioned the key role, you say, in North America, in particular the US played in the beginning of your career, and this connection, we may wonder whether the American Society for Information Science and Technology has been a resource for you, has played a role in your own work or not.

LC: Oh, yeah, sure. When you are looking at the panorama of professional societies and scientific societies in the information sector, I mean, the leading US journal is… I was coming, at the beginning, I was coming from the chemistry field, and in chemistry, the leading journal was The American Chemical Society Journal, ACS, you know. So, I mean, if you want to do

science, go to the States. It's a country where science is well done. And so, it's not surprising that the journal is a first class journal, is a leading journal. You cannot do information science without reading JASIS&T. JASIS first and then JASIS&T after.

MM: What about Journal of Documentation, then?

LC: Well… You asked me to… the classification of a journal. Historically, JASIS&T is certainly an important journal in the field, but it was, and it is, I think, influenced by the historical name of documentation. And in scope, in JASIS&T you find a very large panorama of subjects. A lot of documentation remained more…

MM: More focused.

LC: More focused, than JASIS&T.

MM: More technical.

LC: Yeah.

MM: But did you ever attend ASIS&T meetings? The annual meetings or the mid-year meetings, which were held years ago?

LC: When I was in the States and Canada, at the time, I was following meetings in the field of science policy, but I had no opportunity to go to ASIS&T meetings.

MM: So it's much more publications of the society that you feel you've been influenced?

LC: Yeah, yeah.

MM: Now, like many other disciplines, or eventually even more than many disciplines, information science is looking after its raison d'être of [?] et cetera, what do you see as the main challenge for information science today, especially with the rise of dramatic change in the technological dimensions, on which it is based, or from which it is dependent?

LC: Yeah, I see two challenges. One, more or less technical, and the second more epistemological. The first technical challenge is the need to master what some call the [illegal police ?] of the web. It's a real challenge for information science to master this huge tool that is a web presently, and going to some form of [illegal ?]. So it's presents technical challenges.

MM: You mean it's a political as well as scientific, the ability or not of information science to influence the behavior of large corporations which make the content of electronic information sources of [?]?

LC: I think it's a crucial period to master this huge domination, of some form, of communities by the way of very strong technical tools. So, information science, I think, it's the only discipline able to capture this sociological political dimension, and the technical and scientific dimension of this illegal web. And it's the first challenge. The second challenge is about the epistemological dimension of information science, in information science. And I am praying that… we must continue to develop more epistemologically-grounded information science. It's very difficult for me to accept as the current opinion about, well, information science is that or this. There is not a consensus on the object [of?] information science. And a difference of science, where there is no controversy about the object. I can speak of chemistry, for example. And we need to… Again, may that information science be more epistemologically grounded in a real basis, and a scientific basis of… So, I'm developing and proposing to [?] reflection of epistemological nature about information and information science.

MM: In fact, the very name of information science was proposed, to some extent, as a means to establish the discipline as a scientific discipline in the community of scientific disciplines. This was in the late '50s, if I correctly remember; so, considering the present situation there has been mixed-up success in this effort.

LC: Yes, but I think that…

MM: Where does the weakness in this grounding, epistemological grounding, of the field come, in your view?

LC: I think what is [occurring?] in information sector is a rapid development of techniques, [?]. So, we spend a lot of time developing systems and applications, soft or hard, for information systems… I am always surprised… There is no philosophical reflection, for example, in the [?]. When you look at the courses in information science, there is not a very strong course in the philosophical and epistemological aspects of information science, no philosophical reflection. I do [?] because we attract by techniques and methods and applications. But we need to develop a [?] starting in the information training, to have courses on the philosophical aspect of information.

MM: Okay. What would you tell younger scholars, beginners in scientific studies, to attract them to the field of information science, and to make them excited about opportunities it can offer for young people?

LC: Using a sort of comparison with biological science, I understand that a young scientist chooses to study biological sciences, and study microbes or other objects, because the objective is about human life. So, I think I can use this comparison with information science, and for young people I will say, if you want to embrace the noble task of organizing human knowledge, go to information science. Because when you study information, you study human knowledge. And indirectly, you are contributing to better organization of human knowledge. It's the same as the biologist is contributing to better organization, comprehension, of human life, you know? So for me, for young people, I say… well, I was attracted, and I think they will be attracted by

studying information, because it's a noble task, an honorable task, I think it's a more noble task if you are interested in human knowledge. So, go to information science. Is that good? [laughs]

MM: It's an old dream of humankind, you know, organizing knowledge; we ended up with Babel tower, and it was not a great structure.

LC: [laughs] I know, I know. There is a number of steps, important steps, from Babel tower. We need to continue, because…

MM: To conclude, I would like to ask you how you see the situation of information science in France and in continental Europe in general. You stressed that when you started in this field, France, at least, and other European countries were very much behind the US and the UK. Do you see a change in this respect? Is information science taking more importance and recognition in the scientific scene in Europe?

LC: Well, first in France, because in Europe, I have examples from some countries, but I know not very well the situation in every European country. In France, I think we [?]. It's a very conservative and centralized [?] in France. It's a lack of autonomy. For example, the French university. It's not in favor of developing new fields, and information science is a new field, and it's difficult to enter in the group of various fields, discipline, characterize the academic French system. I mean, we rely on this discipline as the story our traditional chemistry, physics, but new discipline as information science had difficulties to find their place. France would never be a leading country in information science because of centralized systems and the conservative scientific...

MM: That's how universities got, at least in theory, an autonomy, so the situation might change.

LC: I hope so. But I think, we must measure the strong swings of the centralized system, a bureaucratized system, it's a sort of blocking system, difficult to escape from the system. And

while I hope the autonomy will be the rule, but in Europe, a lot of countries are falling the same way, not in centralized form, but in the conservative, traditional approach to information programs. I've seen that mainly in a lot in Latin countries; Spain, Italy, Portugal. They, for example, Bibliotheque--library science… Always you find there's courses of some universities, this always is a [Bibliotheque ?] and I…

MM: Library science, you mean.

LC: Yeah. But it's not library science in the same sense in the Anglo-Saxon world. It's more a… And it's a sort of [?], unable to escape from this vision of the information world. When you go to the north--I mean Germany or Scandinavia--the Anglo-Saxon spirit is present, the situation is not so different from Anglo-Saxon countries. I have a good example of an excellent training center, a research center, in the North European region, but I am not able to give you a good example of training and research center in the South of Europe.

MM: So, to conclude, you are calling for an information revolution in Europe.

LC: Yeah, but let's… before the political revolution in Europe, I think perhaps the North of Europe will smooth the panorama, because there is an important [job?] between the South and North, the South of Europe and the North of Europe. The only solution is a more federal political organization of Europe.

END OF INTERVIEW