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Oral History Interview
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Interviewed by Birger Larsen, Assoc. Prof., Royal School of Library and Information Science, Copenhagen, Denmark

BL (Interviewer): How did you become interested in information science?

PI: I think it started already back when I was studying information science, from '69 to '73, when, around '72, '73, I was taught how faceted classification was working, and it was a very impressive way our professors were showing us how to make this kind of very difficult classification, and therefore I could easily see that one needed not only some kind of normal way of categorizing books and articles, but also a more user-oriented way of looking at how various persons or groups of persons understood the content of documents. And that made me think about context, and therefore it was also very important for me, slightly later, when the first IRFIS conferences started in Europe, the International Research Forum for Information Science, to try to contribute in this area. Those conferences started in '75 in the UK, and Copenhagen was already the second one, in '77, and I think, because I was part of it, that it was important for me to meet all these very theoretical but also empirically based researchers like Kochen and Shera from the United States, and Brian Vickery from Britain, as well as BC Brooks. So, that meant that I could experience some kind of big international bridge, and it seemed very interesting to dig into this kind of science. Not just to look into classification or indexing or cataloging as we had done so much before, but to try to look at things in a comprehensive way. And then later, I would say it has been very important for me to be part of the international context and

international networks, which started already with these IRFIS conferences. So that's where it started, from my point of view, I think.

BL: What were the most significant steps in your career?

PI: Besides becoming Assistant Professor at the Royal School of Library and Information Science in Copenhagen 1974, as part of that, I think it was important for me to be part of a research team headed by Paul Timmerman and we tried to start up, you could say, now, information studies, information-seeking studies, and probably also you could say, interaction studies already at that time. We're now back in '74, -five, -six, -seven, and that research made it possible for me to be a research fellow in the European Space Agency in the online service division in Frascati, Italy, from '81 to '84. I think that is one big thing for me because, down there, there are lots of real scientists, mainly from physics and chemistry, and they were showing me how to make--you could say--rigorous research, and write papers. So, my first articles and, I think, one of my better achievements from an empirical point of view, was done during my stay there. Then later, I had the chance, together with my wife Irene Wormell, to develop a department in the Royal School, which was serving industry with, you would say, information management skills, and basically was automated information systems design.

And from that we went on, because of all the research we could do--and did--I went on in two directions. In the nineties, one was information retrieval, where I became head of the Masters program in the Royal School and later Head of the department of IR. The other one was that I continued in the Center for Informetric Studies, where we tried to make use of citation analysis, and you could say the information retrieval skills I knew about, to be used in the purpose of making online citation analysis in various ways. And then, one peak was that I became Visiting Professor in Finland in 1998 at Åbo Academy University and also, slightly later,

in Tampere University. This led to my Professorship, probably, in Copenhagen in the Royal School of Library and Information Science, where I have been Professor until now, in information science. During all this long period, I've been lucky enough to work together with lots of people, and probably that's the reason why, for example, the Finns made me Doctor of Philosophy honoris causa in 2010; and I think I've been lucky, also, as one peak has been the ASIS&T Research Award I received in 2003, and later on I also got the Derek De Solla prize medal for my contributions in scientometrics. So that, I think, is my development, you could say, and my best moments in my career.

BL: Okay, thank you. What, in your opinion, did you contribute to the field?

PI: I've never really worked alone; I've always worked together with various teams, but if I should point to certain things, it might be... You could say there are two facets of it: the research itself, and more organizational achievements, perhaps, or contributions. If we take the latter first, then you could say that I was lucky to work together with the Finns, especially Kalervo Järvelin, Pertti Vakari and Jaana Kekäläinen, so that we could start up again the information science conferences, under the name of COLIS, the Conceptions of Library and Information Science, back in the '90s, when this IRFIS conference series had stopped in the middle of the '80s in Europe. So we started up COLIS and later I've been lucky also to start up the Information Interaction in Context Conferences, and we also tried to make a manifestation of Nordic cooperation in information science with the Nordic Research School of Library and Information Science (NORSLIS) PhD Network, which was sponsored heavily by the Nordic Council, and running around the Millennium for four or five years in total.

In a scientific way, I believe I've made some contributions in information retrieval, especially information retrieval interaction, and cognitive aspects of information and information

science. On the one hand that led to theories about representation of the information space, interaction and the user space, and that our theories had been distributed a bit to other, younger researchers who were trying to use this idea, or set of ideas. And another approach has also been an attempt to integrate information-seeking theory with information retrieval, especially information retrieval interaction, together with Järvelin from 2000. A completely different track, but also connected, of course, somehow, to information retrieval has been my attempts to make use of citation analysis on the web that meant, or means, webometrics, and I have also tried, and failed, in making some kind of impact factor, which, I must admit, is one of the achievements but also one of the real failures, I think, from a scientific point of view. So, I would say that's my, perhaps my, those things I would be remembered for if I'm remembered at all.

BL: Can you tell us of colleagues who most influenced you?

PI: Yes; that's quite easy. I've thought about who really has meant most to me during the years, and, obviously, I mentioned some of them before: BC Brooks had a huge influence on my earlier work. Also, of course, of contemporaries, Nick Belkin and Stephen Robertson. A heavy influence has also been from Keith van Rijsbergen and his way of doing laboratory research in Glasgow, which has influenced very heavily my way of doing laboratory research in Denmark, but also to teach and deal with PhD students. I think I've used very much Keith's way of doing it. Then, of other contemporaries, unfortunately dead now, Karen Sparck Jones, because of her epistemological rigor. There also were very older ones, you could say, aside from BC Brooks, Eugene Garfield and Don Swanson also. Eugene Garfield because of all his influence on me on ways of doing citation analysis in various ways, and I know him privately also. And Don Swanson because he's one of the few information scientists who covered both information retrieval and scientometrics/bibliometrics, and therefore was a big star, for me, because exactly

this way of putting together two somehow different fields into one, made me curious, and I think very challenging.

So, also, younger researchers I've been influenced by: Mounia Lalmas from Glasgow and various other universities, because of her influence on combining hard core computer science logic and also information interaction. Likewise, you could say that Peiling Wang from Knoxville, because of her methodological influence on my way of doing research. And finally, very younger people like Diane Kelly because they have this very comprehensive way of doing research which I like very much, so, I must say I admire these younger researchers. Yes, I think that's the fundamental influential persons on my career.

BL: And what do you consider as the most significant achievements of information science?

PI: It's difficult, because many minor things which have taken place in the last twenty years, but I think one of the big things--bigger developments--has been the development of search engines, and if you look at search engines, especially the success of Google and Yahoo, then you can easily see that if information science had not existed, then Google and Yahoo and so on would not have looked like they do. The page rank algorithm is perfect, you could say, or imperfect, but the amalgamation of citation analysis-like algorithms and information retrieval algorithms, and the way Yahoo is, in a more qualitative way, is trying to categorize and make available information to users, is also heavily, I think, influenced by ways of thinking in information science, and information studies, as such. So, I would say these two achievements are very much grounded in information science.

Then, of course, there are other minor things going on, within the framework of the web, where we could say that we also have had a big hand. But I think basically it's that. But if one should point on something where we have, during many years, had an influence and helped, it

would be taking from classification and faceted classification, simply because that's the only really contribution we have given to, for example, computer science, but also very important.

BL: What has been the role ASIS&T in this, and in your own work?

PI: I think ASIS&T is very important information junction. I've always seen ASIS&T as a meeting point, an international meeting point, even though it's North American, there've always been a lot of people from other, information scientists from other countries, participating in the ASIS&T meetings. And therefore I say it's very, very fruitful now it becomes more international, so ASISI&T becomes a truly international organization. I think ASIS&T has been a meeting point in the sense that it's there, where scientists of information, practitioners, IT persons, and both younger and senior researchers and practitioners meet. And that's very fruitful, because that's how innovation, for example, comes about, and it's also where you can meet new stars, and make acquaintances with your old friends. That's why it's very important. For me, personally, I think it's, aside from this meeting point issue, it has been the journal, JASIS&T, which has been my most important vehicle for getting information and knowledge about the field, but also, in many cases, my vehicle to my publications, and I'm very proud to be a part, still, of the editorial board of JASIS&T.

BL: What do you see as the main challenges and opportunities for information science?

PI: I think it's very interesting; even though search engines are perhaps our biggest development, or achievement, it's also a potential for our downfall, I think, because more and more will be put on the web, and more and more information will be distributed without real professionals sitting and doing anything about it. It will come directly from the producer and to the end user. And that means there's a challenge to information scientists and information specialists, about what we need to do in the future. And one of the biggest challenges I think will happen, or not

happen, it depends how you look at it, but in the long-term future I don't know really what will be the role of libraries, including public libraries, because a lot of stuff will be present on the web, in various search engines aside from the libraries. And that means the libraries will attempt to be some kind of new thing instead of a living organism. That might be difficult for information science to cope with.

But then, also, I think it's very important because information science is also information technology, as is in the name of ASIS&T, and I think it's more important, especially in the future, to combine much more information technological stuff into the curriculum of information scientists. I think that is one of the challenges to make the proper cocktail, so we're not computer scientists, but we do deal with this--how should I say--triangle, of IT, information use, and information content. And that is also what one could say to the students or younger persons who would like to do something in information science. This is the big thing, I think. This is the good thing about information science, that we combine content, knowledge, with information use in various ways, and put into a framework of information technology. That's why it's very important, also, that we have this in front of us, all the content, use and technology, and not just one, two, of three very fundamental parts of information science. So.

Interviewer: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW