

Information Science as Emerging Metadiscipline

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The story of “the new school of information” is only at its beginning, relatively speaking. In the struggle to define ourselves and justify our existence to the academic world, we are consistently challenged to define how we are unique. The emergence of an interdisciplinary field, in itself, is a story that has taken place many times in a number of disciplines, and the claim that we are unique in that respect is unfounded. Still, there persists a communal sense that we are somehow different, and the subject matter of our field is unlike any that has come before. A question that remains is what is the nature of our field and how will our story unfold to make us different?

The new information science story can be told in an evolutionary framework, detailing the convergence of a number of established disciplines spanning social science, hard science, and humanities. Our subject matter, however, is not fundamentally based in any of these.

We began by bringing together established fields—economics, library science, computer science, psychology, sociology, linguistics, philosophy, management, and others. Early efforts were primarily *trans*-disciplinary. For example, computer science principles were brought to bear on medicine, resulting in medical informatics. Though our understanding of medical information changed, the basic tenets of medicine and computer science remained unaltered. The evolution continued to address *multi*-disciplinary study—examination of phenomena from multiple viewpoints; however, the resulting analysis could still be partitioned into contributions from differentiable disciplinary angles. More recently, we have evolved to an *inter*-disciplinary framework. This phase has included the development of tools and theories that are hybrid, integrated, and non-decomposable along traditional disciplinary lines. Human-computer interaction, auction mechanism design, bibliometrics, and behavioral economics are exemplars of these efforts. The interdisciplinary is informed by earlier multidisciplinary efforts to triangulate vocabulary and provide concept mappings across disciplines.

What is the next step in evolution? What comes after interdisciplinarity? Is “interdisciplinary” simply an intermediate state in a larger evolutionary process? Are we on the way to an independent discipline, or are we headed for something else?

Our primary subjects of study are people, information (in various incarnations), and the dynamic relationship between the two. These concepts are not the exclusive right of any particular domain, and our efforts seem to be focused on building bridges among all the intellectual stakeholders and traditions. In this sense, our evolution is moving toward a *metadiscipline*. Just as metatheory addresses classification and synthesis among theoretical

traditions, metadiscipline aims to provide infrastructure for understanding the relationships among disciplines, serving as a point of convergence or translation for the integration of information that has been uncovered, but not recombined with other disciplinary knowledge.

Where does the story go from here, and how do we fit into the larger academic community? Are we a melting pot for all disciplines? Are we becoming an independent discipline that will be durable, or are we a punctuated catalyst for other disciplines to reconnect? The role of metadiscipline implies that we will somehow transcend the traditional embodiment and enactment of “discipline,” and become something undoubtedly unique.