

What's a Nice Boy Like You Doing in a Business Like This? or: What It Takes to be an Information Scientist

February 20, 1974

Number 8

I am frequently asked by laymen, members of my family, and particularly scientists some tactful version of the question "How did you ever get into this racket?" Did anyone ever ask my friend the nuclear medicine specialist in the Dewar's ad why he chose medicine?¹ Is the same question ever asked of that now famous molecular biologist gracing the ad pages of the intellectual press?

The field of information science has attracted a wide diversity of people. Many came from other established disciplines. Some very talented people have come from no particular discipline at all. Increasing numbers are coming from departments or schools of information or library science.

Unfortunately, many people inside and outside the discipline of information science believe it has provided a unique refuge for many 'who couldn't make it' elsewhere. This tacit aspersion is a variation on the old ". . . those who can't, teach."

For many people, I suspect, "failure" or cop-out in one field may actually be prerequisite for success in another. Failure in a particular field or endeavor should not be confused with failure as a person. I gladly acknowledge that as a bench chemist I was a failure. After my second explosive attempt to

prepare some picric acid derivatives, I decided that I had neither the aptitude nor motivation for laboratory work.

My employer at the time, Professor Louis P. Hammett, agreed with me, but confused my lack of that particular talent with a total lack of originality. He recommended me to my next boss, a medical librarian and historian, as a "hard, but not very original worker." Little did Sanford V. Larkey know what he was taking on. I think I can say with appropriate immodesty that I used my chemical background and training to excellent advantage in chemical documentation and completely disappointed Dr. Larkey. He had been looking for a "hard, but not very original worker," and canned me when my 'originality' got out of hand.

Many information scientists are definitely defensive about their failure--even their success--in fields they have left for work in the world of information and computer sciences. Former psychologists, chemists, physicists, etc., often tell me how 'refreshing' it is to mingle--usually at a society meeting--with former peers who are still 'real' scientists. Such a statement illustrates the defensiveness I've mentioned. It suggests that information science is for them somehow less 'real' than the rest of the world of science. I often question

whether such people are 'real' information scientists. They don't themselves believe in information science as a discipline. Nor do they understand the notion of discipline building.

There are, of course, some unfortunate people who fail or do poorly in everything they try. As I've implied, information science is often accused of having attracted an undue share of them. I doubt, however, that such is actually the case in comparison with most other disciplines. A not inconsiderable number of people who masquerade as scientists in any field are mere technicians, perhaps *good* technicians, but mere technicians nonetheless. If a technician switches fields, he should no more fear having become something less than he should claim having become something more.

The possession of degree parchments frequently masks or, paradoxically, mitigates mediocrity in many fields of science. There may be some consolation in this situation, however, as far as information science is concerned. Until recognized credentials are available in information science--until curricula and professional standards are *widely* established--degrees in information science will not provide its less able practitioners with the camouflage that is available to anyone with a Ph.D. or even a Master's in one of the 'established' disciplines.

It is unfortunate, but true, that a large number of the phonies in all fields wind up being scientific politicians, staff-men, and administrators (cf. the Peter Principle).² Frequently they are actually hurried on their way to such important activity by colleagues who can no longer tolerate their mess-

ing about in the real business of the 'invisible college' and giving it a bad name. Nothing, of course, could be worse. Such people frequently end up wielding a crippling power over those to whom they were once only minor irritations. The foundations attract a good number of them. There they are the 'pimps' that Koestler has in mind in his fictional portrayal of *The [scientific] Call Girls*.³

It is a rare and wonderful thing when a fine research scientist or teacher possesses, along with his professional talents, those required for effective politics and administration. It seems even rarer and more wonderful when such a man is willing, or can be persuaded, to combine their use, without abandoning research altogether--and without sacrificing the scientific outlook in "those corridors of power that seldom lead back to the laboratory."⁴

This conundrum of scientific administration is not at all irrelevant to the practice of information science. Science has by now at least recognized that scientific politics and administration cannot be used as safe havens for the less talented. Increasingly the planning and administration of science--as of government--has become the skillful analysis and management of information. If information science still has its shortcomings--if to some it lacks status in academia--it is nevertheless one of the most important of the 'emerging fields.' I said as much years ago in these pages.⁵ That may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy, but there it is. Perhaps in the US the Watergate affair has emphasized all too well the information crisis that faces us all. Indeed, I

write this en route to Washington to testify before the Congress on that very question.⁶

How did I ever get into this racket? The answer in the old joke is appropriate enough: Just lucky, I guess.

1. Garfield, E. Illusions of grandeur and other disappointments. *Current Contents*® (CC®) No. 26, 27 June 1973, p. 5.
2. Peter, L.J. & Hull, R. *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong*. New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1969.--For those who may not know this excellent book, the Peter Principle (PP) explains the operation of Murphy's Law (if anything can go wrong, it will) in organizational settings. The PP convincingly shows that in an organizational bureaucracy, as in other physical mixtures of unlike items and substances, the lighter rise to the top, each individual eventually reaching (or being pushed) to his "level of incompetence," from which he directs with more or less havoc, activities he may once have been competent individually to undertake.
3. Koestler, A. *The Call Girls: A Tragic Comedy*. New York: Random House, 1973 -- cf. an item in the *ISI*® *Press Digest*, CC No. 5, 30 Jan 74, p. 10 which briefly re-

- views this quasi-novel on international scientific conferences and the foundations that organize and finance them.
4. Mellanby, K. Disorganization and scientific research. *New Scientist* 59(860): 434-6, 23 August 73.
 5. Garfield, E. Who are the information scientists? CC No. 32, 7 August 1962, p. 4.
 6. On January 29, 1974, I testified before a Congressional committee studying the Government's use and development of advanced information technology. My testimony will be included in Part III of the committee's report: Ninety-Third Congress, House of Representatives, 1st Session. *Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations: Federal Information Systems and Plans: Federal Use and Development of Advanced Information Technology, Part I (April 10 and 17, 1973); Part II (June 19 and 26; July 17 and 31, 1973)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973.