

Curators of the infosphere?

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Our questions

Can Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Information (PI)

- provide a foundation for Library and Information Science (LIS)?
- provide a new role for the information professions as 'curators of the infosphere'?

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D Bawden and L Robinson

Curating the infosphere: Luciano Floridi's Philosophy of Information as the foundation for Library and Information Science

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The reception of PI in LIS

- PI is developed and presented by Floridi in the late 1990s
- The idea of LIS as applied PI was introduced by Ken Herold (2001)
- Developed by Floridi in a 2002 paper in *Social Epistemology*,
- Discussed in special issue of *Library Trends* (2004)
- Critiqued by Furner (2010) Fyffe (2015), Martens (2015) and others
- Talks by Floridi at Colis (2013), CILIP (2017), iSchools (2018)
- 'Book symposium' in *Journal of Documentation* on Floridi's *Logic of Information* (2020)

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Does LIS need a philosophical foundation?

- or several complementary foundations?
- or no foundation at all?

Floridi (2002) – the discipline's identity crisis, originating in the 1930s, has been due to a search for such a foundation.

- we do not know our place in the academic world
- we do not know what our profession is for

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The search for a foundation for LIS

- [LIS] researchers have been lured by a variety of friendly but pre-established philosophies instead of fighting for their own place in the philosophical field (Floridi 2002)
- examining the ideas of a ... philosopher, extracting principles and offering them as presuppositions upon which information science may be based (Vickery 1997)
- [for LIS] obtaining a philosophy is something like borrowing a book ... [but] the borrowed philosophies do not really belong to us, always seem to need to be renewed, and we end up returning them, only to borrow others (Zwaldo 1997)

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The search for a foundation for LIS 2

- high-flying LIS researchers swoop indiscriminately down upon the theoretical terrain, colonising Popperian worlds, or cannibalizing hermeneutics, phenomenology, general systems theory, symbolic interactionism, decision theory, existentialism, structural-functionalism, cognitive science, or philosophy of language, to name just a few of the theoretical models on current exhibit in LIS research literature. (Frohmann 1992)

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Pausable foundations

- Popper / Brookes Three Worlds ontology
- social epistemology

- others: hermeneutics, General Theories of Information, etc.

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Popper / Brookes Three worlds ontology

- Karl Popper's three world ontology, and particularly his World 3 of objective, communicable knowledge, was famously heralded by Brookes (1980) as the philosophical foundation for information science
- Floridi regards Popper's conception of a third world as an example of the evolution of PI prior to the digital revolution, and he himself was influenced by Popper's ideas of knowledge.
- while Popper's conception cannot in itself provide a basis for LIS, it may be a precursor of such a foundation

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Social epistemology

- The other alternative basis suggested for LIS has been SE, not least because its originators, Shera and Egan, were librarians.
- "[SE] can give librarianship its intellectual foundation for which we have been searching for so long" (Shera 1970).
- SE cannot be a basis for LIS, since SE has as its basis the study of knowledge in order to discover truth. LIS has to deal with a much wider range of sources than those which provide 'true knowledge', and its remit is not knowledge itself, but sources. (Floridi 2002)

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Social epistemology 2

- SE and LIS are certainly related, but both in need of a common foundation, which Floridi identifies as PI. Furner (2015) makes the same point: that Egan and Shera saw LIS as, in essence, "knowledge studies", but that field would be far wider than any LIS could reasonably encompass, and Fyffe (2015) supports Floridi's arguments against SE as a basis for LIS.
- Fallis (2006) suggests that, even if we accept PI as the foundation for LIS, SE may be valuable as a framework for some LIS activities, those focused on knowledge acquisition

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So why Floridi's PI as a foundation?

- overlap of interests of PI and LIS
- PI is information- and document-centric
- PI relates information to data and knowledge
- humanistic aspect of PI
- completeness of PI
- relevance of PI concepts to the current LIS environment
- LIS can contribute to PI as well as take from it

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Overlap of interests

- Floridi's thoughts on libraries may have played some part in its formulation in the 1990s, and he was influenced by Popper's ideas of objective knowledge
- "the philosophy of information is congruent with library tradition. From Bliss and Danton's discussion in the 1930s, through Egan (without Shera), Nitecki, and Floridi, there stands a very definite genealogical line" (Morán-Reyes (2015, p. 587))

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Overlap of interests 2

Floridi (2002) suggested that LIS as applied PI may be defined as

- "the discipline concerned with documents, their life cycles and the procedures, techniques and devices by which these are implemented, managed and regulated. LIS applies the fundamental principles and general techniques of PI to solve definite, practical problems and deal with specific, concrete phenomena. In turn it conducts empirical research for practical service-oriented purposes (e.g. conservation, valorization, education, research, communication and co-operation), thus contributing to the development of basic research in PI)".

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Overlap of interests 3

the list of topics in the information life cycle given by Floridi (2002) in a discussion of PI and information dynamics (2002), include:

- authoring
- collecting
- classifying
- retrieving
- accessing
- using

very similar to those typically taken as the core of LIS

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Information- and document-centric

- the definition of information within PI is appropriate than that in numerous other theories of information (Dinneen and Brauner 2015)
- although PI's definition of information includes 'truthful', this does not ignore the fact that "libraries are full of 'false knowledge'" (Floridi 2004)
- in the PI perspective, LIS deals with 'semantic content' recorded in documents; semantic content including information (true), misinformation (false), and disinformation (deliberately false). Semantic content also includes fiction and other forms of material of relevance to LIS (Van der Veer Martens 2015).
- LIS is not concerned with the truth of information *per se*, but with the quality of semantic content.

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Information- and document-centric 2

- PI give special importance, and ethical value, to documents, because of their status as rich informational entities
- because every entity is assigned some moral (informational) value to begin with, does not imply that they will continue to have the same value after any thought has been applied: "the point at stake is not some daft idea about the intrinsic value of Shakespeare versus Dan Brown" (Floridi 2008)

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Relates information to data and knowledge

- PI encompasses, and links, the various information-like entities of concern to LIS; in particular data and knowledge.
- Data is at the foundation of PI, and its has been used to develop ideas of data ethics.

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Humanistic

- "Each of us, as a beautiful glitch, is a fragile and very pliable entity whose life is essentially made of information" (On human dignity as a foundation for the right to privacy - Floridi 2016)

PI extends to a concern for human dignity, and for the private autonomous self-development of persons.

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Completeness

- PI is not intended to provide a single, unified theory of information in all domains. Rather it provides a formal framework for linking and relating the various aspects and manifestations of information, and hence for integrating, though not in a reductionist way, all the information-centred disciplines, including LIS.
- This seems to us to be a very attractive feature of PI for LIS, which has always been concerned about its place in the intellectual world, and its relation with other disciplines.

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Completeness 2

- PI begins with information ontology, and extends to epistemology, ethics, information governance, information society, and politics.
- that PI should begin with an ontological analysis of information *per se*, and lead directly into a system of ethics based on this, is one of its most remarkable features (Ess 2008)
- no alternative philosophical foundation yet proposed has attempted such a broad scope.

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Four fundamental PI concepts

- fourth revolution: Copernican, Darwinian, Freudian and Informational
- infosphere: our information environment, blending physical and digital
- onlife: our way of information being, again blending physical and digital
- informational frictions: whatever impedes the free flow of information

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The digital transition

- ‘once only in the history of humanity’

will we undergo the transition to onlife in the infosphere, as the result of the fourth revolution, and need to balance (not necessarily reduce) information frictions

- the existential crisis of LIS
- these concepts give us a new perspective for understanding the radical, rapidly-developing, and often confusing, changes in the information environment which cause continual reassessment of the nature and purpose of LIS.

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LIS can contribute to PI as well as take from it

- in taking PI as a foundation for LIS - LIS, in its own research and reflective practice is contributing the development of PI itself; an organic and synergistic relation, far from the adoption of external 'foreign' philosophies as a basis for LIS.
- “By contributing to the development of PI, LIS can carry on the task of developing its own theoretical foundation from within” (Floridi 2002)
- "... LIS may just be as important to PI as PI is to LIS in terms of deepening our mutual understanding of information ontologies, the dynamics of informational domains, and the variety of evolving relationships among information organisms and information objects” (Martens 2015)

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Curating the infosphere

- there are three levels at which theory may be applied, for LIS as for other disciplines: the level of day to day routine practice; the level of the delineation of the discipline and its knowledge base, as given in academic courses; and the foundational, and necessarily abstract, level. PI operates at the last of these, at is unreasonable to expect it to deal with all three, though it may certain inform the first two (Floridi 2002)

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Curating the infosphere 2

- "The library and information community ... are experiencing a profound evolution of their role from keepers to curators of the infosphere" (Floridi, CILIP conference 2017)
- the central PI concept that the ultimate ethical good is the flourishing of the infosphere
- the task of LIS is the stewardship of the semantic environment.
- a stewardship based on the IE concept of 'ontic trust' by which all objects with some informational nature are worthy of respect (Fyffe 2015)

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Curating the infosphere 3

- The active role of curation, first explicitly stated for LIS by Fyffe (2015), is crucial, and not only in directing the preservation of the human record. It should also help in LIS's search for its remit in helping to overcome some of the perceived problems of the current information environment: fake news, post-truth, alternative facts, filter bubbles, and the rest (Bawden 2017).

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Informational privacy

- a formulation of informational privacy, based on PI
- incorporated into models of information behaviour and information literacy
- D Bawden and L Robinson, "Essentially made of information": concepts and implications of informational privacy, *Information Research*, 2019, 24(4), paper colis1913, available at <http://www.informationr.net/ir/24-4/colis/colis1913.html>
- D Bawden and L Robinson. "The dearest of our possessions": applying Floridi's information privacy concept in models of information behavior and information literacy. *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 2020, 71(9), 1030-1043. doi: 10.1002/asi.24367

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Conceptual privacy model

Philosophy of information, and information ethics: the ground for the privacy concept.	Human dignity: the basis for privacy claims.	Typology of privacy and privacy harms: information privacy being fundamental.	Contexts: types of information; relations between <u>inforgs.</u>
Individuals and groups: constituted by their information; the entities to which privacy can apply,	Information accessibility, flows and gaps; informational frictions	Digital technologies: affecting the nature of privacy harms and their solution.	Anonymity and obscurity: fundamentals of privacy in the infosphere.

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Art practice

- aims to situate art practice in relation to contemporary informational theories and suggests that the way we view contemporary art practice needs to move beyond existing theories.
- Art exists as part of what helps us interpret our existence within a universal informational environment that is negotiated by informational entities that include, amongst other things, conscious informational organisms and possibly artificial informational agents.
- GE McQueen and D Bawden. Luciano Floridi and contemporary art practice. *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, in press.
DOI:10.1080/14702029.2020.1823762.

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Conclusions

- Is PI a good foundation for LIS?
- Can it be combined with others, for example social epistemology?
- How would be adaption of PI as a basis change the academic LIS discipline?
- How would the concept of curating the infosphere change the information professions?