What Do You Do for a Living?

If you travel a lot, you meet people in many different professions. Soon comes the inevitable question, "What do you do for a living?" I sometimes envy those of you who can answer simply, "I'm a biochemist" or "I'm an engineer" or "I'm a physician." Other people who have an equally easy time of it include teachers, psychologists—even botanists or mathematicians. Whatever image people may have of such professions, they at least think they know something about your occupation. But whenever I tell people, "I'm an information scientist," the response is, "What's that?" They don't always ask the question, but I am all too familiar with their expression of bewilderment.

I must confess, therefore, that my response is not always completely truthful. Even if I simply said, "I'm in the information business," most people would not have the slighest idea of what I do.

The problem is more complicated because even an adequate definition of "information scientist" would not accurately describe what I do for a living. So to avoid a long discussion, I recently told a New York cab driver I was a publisher.

But this simple job description didn't satisfy him: "What do you publish?" he asked. I thought I could shorten the conversation by saying "Scientific magazines," but he relentlessly pursued the point. "Sci-Fi?" he inquired. I knew my white lie had gotten me in trouble, so I told him I was the managing director of a company ᴛhat produces something that is a cross between *TV Guide* and *Reader's Digest* for scientists. That seemed to satisfy him.

I've tried this approach with many people. When I tell most men I'm a publisher they rarely push the conversation any further. Women usually press on. When they do, I tell them that ISI® produces a kind of *Reader's Guide* to science and scholarship. From there, it is a question of how excited they can get about the distinctions between citation indexes and the subject indexes you usually find in books.

I know that a lot of my colleagues in information science will consider my methods a cop out. After all, even the 1977 edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *information science* (p. 592). What could be simpler than "the collec-

tion, classification, storage, retrieval, and dissemination of recorded knowledge treated as both a pure and as an applied science"?[1] Although the public's awareness of information activities has increased, this definition still does not tell what I *do*! I could try to describe to the listener the terms "information science" or "information scientist" in greater detail but that often proves tedious for both of us.[2,3]

On occasion I've tried solving my identity problem by stating that I am the director of an organization called the Institute for Scientific Information® . For some odd reason most people think they hear "Institute for Scientific Research." As a consequence, they may start questioning me about any scientific subject from recombinant DNA to black holes. This happened to me during a recent radio interview. It can very quickly give you an inferiority complex. After all—how many times can you say, "I don't know, but I can look it up for you?"

Once a discussion has taken this direction it is hard to get the conversation back to information retrieval. I can sometimes do this, however, when I tell the person that ISI is involved in experiments using home TV sets to transmit information stored in computers. In this way, consumers, like scientists and scholars, can find out everything that has been published on any topic they choose.[4] I can then point out that the thousands of scientific and scholarly journals in the world publish hundreds of thousands of articles each year. It is the job of my organization to help research scientists and scholars keep up with this information.

If the conversation lasts long enough for me to go into the joys of citation indexing and *Current Contents*® , I then face the inevitable problematic question: "All this is very interesting indeed, but how did you study for it?"

I then go on to tell them that I and many others in the field of information science took circuitous routes to our jobs.

In my case, I got my first degree in chemistry. I worked for a while as a chemist but then accidentally landed a job with the Welch Library medical indexing project at Johns Hopkins University.[5] They needed a chemist to help investigate the development of computer-derived indexes to scientific and medical literature.

While working on this project, I developed *Contents in Advance (CIA)*, forerunner of *Current Contents*. CIA included the contents pages of library and documentation journals. One of the reasons I was canned from my job there was that I persisted in preparing *Contents in Advance* after my boss told me to stop. I'm afraid that stubbornness may be one of the qualities you need to get ahead in any business. But it isn't always the most appropriate behavior.

I left Baltimore and returned to Columbia where I obtained a master's degree in library science. At library school I continued to produce *Contents in Advance* with the help of a classmate, Anne McCann. I never did have a job as a

traditional "librarian." After leaving library school, I served as a documentation consultant to several industrial firms. At the same time, I set up a company called DocuMation, Inc. to produce a management version of *Contents in Advance* for Bell Telephone Labs. I simultaneously produced the original version of *Current Contents* for the social sciences. Later on I began the life sciences edition of *Current Contents* for several pharmaceutical companies. While all this was going on I was also working at the University of Pennsylvania on my doctorate in structural linguistics. During this period, I also changed the name of my company to Eugene Garfield Associates.

The idea for *Current Abstracts of Chemistry & Index Chemicus* ™ *(CAC&IC* ™*)* grew out of my longtime association with Smith, Kline & French and other pharmaceutical companies. This is an index to all new chemical compounds, of which we have since indexed over 2,600,000. About the time I launched *CAC&IC* in 1960 I changed the name of the company one last time, to the Institute for Scientific Information. In the early 60s, ISI published the first of our large indexes to the scholarly literature, the *Science Citation Index*® *(SCI*® *)*.

Since then we have developed a great variety of computerized information services and printed publications. In recent years our science and social sciences data bases have been put online as *SCISEARCH*® and *Social SCISEARCH*® . This means that they are accessible through computer terminals located in libraries throughout North America and Europe. Most recently we moved into the arts and humanities, creating the multidisciplinary *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* ™ and a new *Current Contents* edition, *CC*® */A&H.*

When I was a cab driver, I never had trouble explaining what I did.[6] But it's not a job I ever wanted to make a career of. Even though the term information scientist does not adequately describe what I do, I prefer that dilemma to going back to hacking. I think I'll carry copies of this essay around with me. Maybe I can use it to ward off cab drivers and cocktail party guests when I don't feel like explaining what I do for a living.   ©1979 ISI

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