

When words are key: negotiating meaning in information research

Negotiating
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Bonnie J. Tulloch and Michelle Kaczmarek

School of Information, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Saguna Shankar

*Department of Information Science, University at Buffalo, Buffalo,
New York, USA, and*

Lisa P. Nathan

School of Information, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

Purpose – This project set out to explore information scholars’ perceptions of the influence of their keyword selections and the implications of their linguistic choices on possibilities for and perceptions of the field of Information Science. We trialed a narrative methodological approach to investigate the multiple stories told with specific keywords, how they relate to larger discourses within the field and the impact they have on the lives of information researchers.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on Arthur Frank’s narrative analysis to consider keywords as stories, which shape one’s sense of professional identity and belonging. The analysis, which is informed by insights from multi-disciplinary scholars of keywords, employs data from a keywords-oriented workshop with Information School faculty and students, as well as an online questionnaire sent to heads of Information Schools.

Findings – We did not find a singular definitive story of information science scholars’ experiences with keywords. Rather we identify tensions surrounding common and contested understandings of discipline, canon and information, engaging the complexity of interdisciplinary, international, intellectual and moral claims of the field. This research offers insight into the experiential factors that shape scholars’ engagement with keywords and the tensions they can create.

Originality/value – A wealth of bibliometric analyses of keywords focuses on finding the “right” words to describe the scholarship you seek or the work you want others to discover. However, this study offers information researchers a novel approach, creating space to acknowledge the generative tensions of keywords, beyond the extractive logic of search and retrieval.

Keywords Narrative analysis, Information studies, Language, Identity, Keywords, Interdisciplinarity, Information stories

Paper type Article

Introduction

At a fundamental level, the landscape of information research is one of words – information, record, document, relevance, practice, archives, design, research, and system – these are but a

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few. When navigating the field, scholars necessarily confront the question: *What words do I select?* Answers to this question, which we must provide repeatedly throughout the course of our careers, determine our ability to successfully convey the meaning and value of our research to different communities. As is the case for all academics, the words we choose affect the reception and impact of our work. These terms can make us hireable, fundable, publishable, promotable, and acceptable to different academic communities. The vocabularies that describe information research influence whether one's scholarship is prioritized or marginalized.

And yet, the complexity of practices involved in the selection of these words is often overlooked. While scholars have outlined debates surrounding different terms in information research (Buckland, 1999; Furner, 2004; Hartel, 2020; Madsen, 2016), less attention has been given to the experiential aspects of language use within the field. For this reason, we developed the iWords project, a reflective inquiry that positioned us to consult other information researchers and professionals about their personal experiences negotiating the different names and narratives of information research (Tulloch *et al.*, 2018). While there are a variety of professional organizations associated with the information field, we chose to conduct these conversations in the context of the iSchools community, because of the diversity of units it represents, as well as its close associations with organizations such as the Association of Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE).

In the first phase, we led workshop activities at the 2018 iConference. In the second phase, we sent a questionnaire to the heads of iSchool programs from the list available on the iSchools Consortium website in 2018. Both the workshop and the questionnaire invited information scholars to reflect on the question: How do our vocabularies affect our conceptualizations of information research?

Context

We explored this question through a novel epistemological and ontological framework within the information field. Our humanities-inspired orientation (Feinberg, 2012) shifts attention away from quantitative measures that position vocabularies as measurable end-products, to focus on the practices surrounding scholars' engagement with keywords. For this reason, we departed from investigations that take a bibliometric-informed approach to linguistic analysis (e.g. Chua and Yang, 2008). While bibliometric approaches highlight important trends within information research, they are limited in their ability to account for the specific contexts that give keywords their meaning, particularly as they relate to scholars' situated experiences.

In basic terms, "[a] keyword is a socially significant word that does socially significant work" (Peters, 2016, p. xx). By attending to the social significance of scholars' experiences with keywords, this inquiry contributes to present information research by viewing vocabularies as semiotic negotiations that are constantly in flux. However, it simultaneously expands upon individual experts' philosophical discussions of key terms (e.g. Buckland, 1999; Furner, 2004) by including the voices and lived experiences of others.

We focus on keywords as a means of representation and identification for several reasons: (1) they are a central tool for information researchers, called upon in indexes, ontologies, and classification systems; (2) they are a familiar means of representing scholarly work; and (3) scholars have found keywords a productive means of exploring the relationships between language, society, and culture (Peters, 2016; Williams, 1976). By focusing our inquiry on information scholars' engagements with keywords, we aimed to examine the different ways language shapes people's understandings of information research. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams and others have recognized how keywords represent "[. . .] an active vocabulary – a

way of recording, investigating and presenting problems of meaning in the area in which the meanings of *culture* and *society* have formed” (Williams, 1976, p. 13, emphasis in original) [1]. Our aim in this inquiry was not to find the single definitive story of scholars’ experiences with keywords, but rather, to create a methodological approach that highlighted some of the active stories told with specific keywords, how they relate to larger discourses within the field, and the impact they have on the lives of information researchers. The value of this paper’s approach lies in its communicative potential, not only providing a formal entry point into discussions of the ongoing tensions surrounding the field’s different vocabularies, but also tangible activities and questions through which information scholars, academic units, and professional organizations might continue to negotiate identity and meaning.

The project

This inquiry developed through scholarly activities facilitated over a number of years and events, including a departmental symposium, a 2018 ASIS&T poster, and two iConference interactive sessions, one in 2018 (i.e. the iWords workshop), and the other in 2019. In this paper, we share our observations and insights developed throughout these engagements, with data grounded in formal research activities at the iWords workshop, held at the 2018 iConference in Sheffield, UK. We received institutional ethics approval to collect observations and materials generated by participants through the workshop. This approach involved documenting the following workshop activities, conducted with 22 participants (the researchers included) [2]: a keyword connection game where participants were asked to identify and discuss keywords that were connected to their research interests; a panel discussion where three information scholars shared their expertise and experience describing the information field; and a word dice game through which participants were invited to make links between their areas of research (see Appendices). Along with these activities, we conducted an online questionnaire investigating iSchool heads’ experiences as leaders communicating about the field of Information Science to various audiences, inviting heads listed on a publicly available membership list on the iSchools Consortium website. Questionnaire responses provided generative insights that supplemented those gathered through the workshop.

Methodological approach: a dialogical narrative analysis

We conducted a narrative analysis of this data set gathered from 31 participants (i.e. 22 information researchers’ experiences, documented through images, written and drawn responses to activities, and the authors’ fieldnotes/reflections; and, 9 iSchool heads’ questionnaire responses). Our approach to analysis draws upon Arthur Frank’s “socio-narratology” (Frank, 2012, p. 16). The dialogic approach of socio-narratology steps away from viewing stories as mimetic, mirrors of a reality that all would interpret in the same way. At the same time, it also steps away from the idea that the stories have to be complete (or the data comprehensive) in order to be generative. Frank notes that, “[t]he dialogical principle here is that no one—especially the researcher—ever has ‘the whole story,’ whether that story is told around a campfire, or in an interview, or in a published book” (Frank, 2012 p. 103). This mode of interpretation acknowledges difference and positionality. Words, and the stories they tell, can be understood in various ways and can have unpredictable effects (Frank, 2012). Rigor came through our careful and critical engagement with the stories participants shared, which gestures to the limitations of our subjective stance while revealing the insights it can produce in dialogue with those of others.

To explore the range of participants’ perspectives after the workshop, members of the research team highlighted the different stories that emerged in relation to certain keywords.

These keywords were selected based on their significance to the dialogical interactions that shaped participants' responses during the workshop activities. We compared our fieldnotes taken throughout the workshop and cross-referenced these observations with other materials gathered from participants (i.e. keyword connection cards, word dice, sticky note reflections, and brainstormed group notes). Reviewing this data, we identified three central keywords through which different stories and perspectives were shared: discipline, canon, and information. These keywords were selected based on the conversational response they generated among participants. A similar method of analysis was taken with the questionnaire results. We reviewed the responses and identified central terms and perspectives that corresponded to discussions we noted during the workshop. Throughout this process, we reflected on how these activities supported different kinds of storytelling, each of which revealed insights about the factors that shape how information scholars describe their work.

In his overview of socio-narratology, Frank offers several questions to help guide dialogical narrative analysis (Frank, 2012). We fine-tuned these questions to consider the implications they hold for the keyword conversations we encountered in our research. We offer these questions as both an explanation of our analytical method and as a provocation for readers of this work to consider their own relationship with keywords:

1. "What is the force of fear in the [keyword], and what animates desire?" (Frank, 2012, p. 81) [3]

It may seem sensationalist to introduce the words "fear" and "desire" in a conversation of keywords, but we invite you to consider the aspirations and concerns that motivate your research, the apprehensions you come across along the way, and the choices you make in articulating your work. This project was motivated by an interest in the different voices and boundaries of the information field and, indeed, a desire to find a place within the field where we felt our interests belonged. The "fears" and "desires" that accompany the pressures of academia will likely be familiar to most readers: the desire to know, to advance a social cause, the pressure to publish, to secure funding, and to have others validate that your scholarship matters. Alongside our individual motivations and insecurities, we noticed, too, a broader conversation concerning the desire to ensure a place in the academy for Information Science.

2. "Who is *holding their own* in the [keyword], but also, is the [keyword] making it more difficult for other people to hold their own?" (Frank, 2012, p. 77, emphasis in original)

We use keywords to tell others about our scholarly or personal identities. For some, keywords may represent an aspiration or serve as resistance to a dominant idea; keywords help us to be recognized. In other words, scholars can use keywords to hold their own. However, justifying recognition for some can create vulnerabilities for others. In a field of diverse scholarship, we want to pay attention to how people hold their own through keywords, and how the field creates space for people to hold their own differently together.

3. "What does the [keyword] make narratable?" (Frank, 2012, p. 75)

Narratability, according to Frank, creates conditions in which lives can be enriched or diminished, and realities enacted (Frank, 2012). Knowledge organization scholars remind us that the keywords we choose to organize information can serve to legitimize certain experiences and render others invisible (Bowker and Star, 1999; Feinberg *et al.*, 2014). This narratability influences our sense of what belongs where, who is welcome, what is important enough to select, and what actions make sense. Through both information scholars and Frank, we learn that selection is a form of evaluation. By considering what keywords make narratable about the field of information research, we are encouraged to pay attention not only to the stories that can be told, but what silences might hide.

4. “What is the effect of people being caught up in their own [keywords] while living with people caught up in other [keywords]?” (Frank, 2012, p. 78)

Frank illustrates how getting caught up in stories can limit our capacity to comprehend the perspectives, actions, and stories of others. Academic research can at times be consuming. Do the keywords we use to describe ourselves and our research make it more difficult to make sense of the work of others? We are interested in the roles keywords play in facilitating and hindering our ability to listen and relate to the work of others.

5. “How does a [keyword] help people, individually and collectively, to remember who they are? How does a [keyword] do the work of memory?” (Frank, 2012, p. 82)

The information field works to organize and facilitate the memory work of others. Keywords tell stories in classification systems, indexes, and online search systems about what information is accessible, relevant, or worth remembering. We also do memory work within the field; when we cite particular scholars in our work or distinguish canonical information scholarship, we reach out to others and tell stories about who we are, individually and collectively. Through this project, we listen for the stories we tell as a field about our history, and consider how this shapes our imagined futures.

These questions provide the critical analytical framework for the keyword-related stories shared through the workshop and questionnaire. Our analysis considered the effects different keywords have on scholars’ experiences, which “influence [their] attitudes” toward different terms (Buckland, 1999, p. 970). In the section below we consider the ways keywords participate in our disciplinary storytelling. Specifically, we utilize Frank’s questions to reflect on the different ways these keyword stories participate in larger discourses surrounding the interdisciplinary, international, intellectual, and moral claims associated with the field of information research. This generative analytic approach enabled us to consider the work of these stories – work that leads to insightful connections rather than exclusive categories (Shotwell, 2016).

In keeping with this project’s dialogical approach, we present the findings in a narrative fashion that highlights the way these research experiences function as stories of which we were a part. When describing participants’ contributions to our research activities and conversations, we have chosen not to attribute quotations by name to specific individuals. The stories of dialogic exchange this project represents transcend any one individual and it is in recognition of this fact that we present stories as open to further collaboration and transformation. As authors, participants, and storytellers of this project, we bring implicit and explicit ideas of information research to our engagements. When we joined conversations with students and faculty members, we noticed that this field, like us, is composed of people from varied disciplinary backgrounds. Readers of this paper will have different relationships to the keywords, stories, and names of disciplines and academic communities mentioned within. Reaching out to you, reader, we ask you to consider a few questions as you read: What keywords do you consider your own? How do you use language to signal your position within this field? Which terms amplify your voice, and connect you to others in a sense of becoming and belonging?

Findings: key stories

Negotiating “discipline”: “what is the force of fear in the [keyword], and what animates desire?” (Frank, 2012, p. 81)

“What do you mean by discipline?” Variations of this question arose during our first activity at the iWords workshop. [4] This keyword connection game was designed as a “get to know you” ice breaker where individuals in the workshop could mingle and discuss their research interests. We had provided each participant with a card that had the following prompts:

- (1) Name 3 disciplines that you can relate your work to.
- (2) Describe your research in 3 keywords.

The purpose of these keyword connection cards was to allow participants to find other people in the room with corresponding and different research interests. In an effort to make the activity more flexible, we deliberately left the definition of “discipline” open, so participants could decide how they wanted to identify the research areas associated with their work. We were surprised when participants struggled with the meaning of the word as they began to fill out their cards. According to Frank (2012, p. 81), “fear” can take many different forms and, in this case, the ambiguity surrounding the term discipline created some discomfort and apprehension. Our own experiences trying to identify with different communities of researchers allowed us to recognize this sense of discomfort as we collectively negotiated this activity. Participants expressed a *desire* to fill their cards out “correctly,” but, in order to do this, they wanted to ensure that they had the right understanding of the term. As the keyword activity progressed, however, participants became less concerned with doing it correctly and more concerned with connecting with each other. The participants’ keyword connection cards we collected offer insights into how these scholars negotiated their understanding of *discipline* in conversation. Specifically, these cards suggest that participants altered their understanding of their disciplinary commitments through their interactions with other researchers (see Figures 1 and 2). Some crossed out their initial words and replaced them with completely different ones, while others added new words to the ones they already had, writing them beside the old ones.

Figure 1.
Sample of a
participant’s keyword
connection card

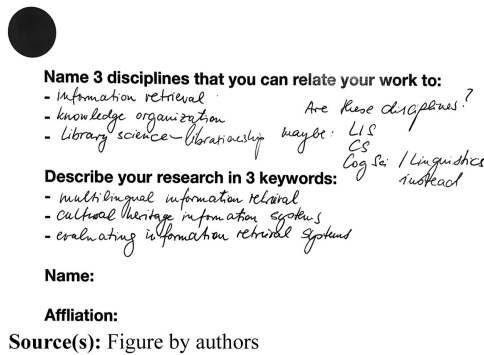
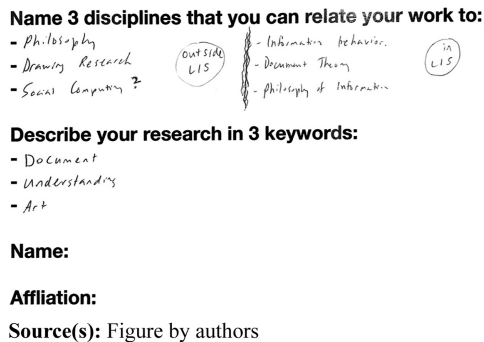


Figure 2.
Sample of a
participant’s keyword
connection card



While the descriptions on these cards are narrative fragments of larger discourses, they nevertheless represent stories of dialogic exchange. In particular, they demonstrate how participants were negotiating the meaning of the word *discipline* whilst trying to represent their research to others. One participant, for example, decided to define the word discipline as it might be understood within and outside of the field of “LIS” (i.e. Library and Information Science). Alternatively, another participant expressed their uncertainty of what the word *discipline* meant by writing down the question, “Are these disciplines?” and listing several different areas of academic study below it. These instances, and others we observed throughout the course of the activity, demonstrate the way scholars were trying to make the word discipline “work” for them (Frank, 2012, p. 3). They recognized that different interpretations of *discipline* would make different aspects of their research “narratable”, and therefore shareable, in the activity (Frank, 2012, p. 75).

In the context of this keyword connection activity, which functioned as a sort of initiation into the workshop and the first day of the iConference, one can see that a possible “fear” inspired by the term *discipline* concerns the issue of belonging (Frank, 2012, p. 81). Participants understood that identifying with specific disciplines would affect their ability to connect with each other and find common ground in their research. The fear of misinterpreting the word *discipline*, in this sense, is related to the discomfort or uncertainty that comes from not being able to access the language that would inform participation and connection in this space. Participants’ desire to accurately understand the meaning of the term was animated by the activity, which asked individuals to identify with the community of information researchers in the workshop. Our observations and the keyword connection cards demonstrate ways in which the desire to connect with others was expressed through an exploration of the definitional boundaries of keywords and disciplines. To the extent that it made participants reflect on how their work aligned with different conceptions of information research, the term *discipline* allowed them “individually and collectively, to remember who they are” and why they would be at an iConference (Frank, 2012, p. 82). Various participants, for example, included the word “information” in their descriptions of their disciplines. Linguistically speaking, this move anchored their work in the information field and their identities as “information researchers.”

At the same time, participants’ responses also demonstrate how some attempted to “hold their own” when listing three possible disciplines related to their work (Frank, 2012, p. 77). By exploring different interpretations of the term *discipline* in their responses (e.g. by marking their card up, adding words, writing questions, etc.), participants were able to qualify the relevance of their research to different areas of academic study. This is not to say, however, that the term *discipline* made it easy for them to hold their own when describing their research. On the contrary, the fact that many of the participants initially had trouble negotiating the term suggests the way it presents difficulties for scholars when defining their work. If participants were too “caught up” in identifying with a specific understanding of discipline, or specific disciplines, it became more challenging for them to connect with others who described their research in different terms (Frank, 2012, p. 78).

Interdisciplinarity and information research: “who is holding their own in the [keyword], but also, is the [keyword] making it more difficult for other people to hold their own?” (Frank, 2012, p. 77, emphasis in original)

The questions surrounding the meaning of the word discipline and the struggles participants had defining the term opened up conversations about the *interdisciplinary* nature of information research, or, more specifically, the claims scholars have made in an attempt to establish its interdisciplinarity as an inherent part of the field’s identity. One finds these claims in Marcia Bates’s description of Information Science as a “meta-discipline” and Andrew Dillon’s own argument of “What it Means to Be an iSchool” (Bates, 1999, p. 1044;

Dillon, 2012, pp. 267–273). According to Bates, “[t]he meta-disciplines are distinguished by the fact that they are interested in the subject matter of all the conventional disciplines, they do something with that subject matter that is of value for society [. . .]” (Bates, 1999, p. 1044). Dillon echoes this interdisciplinary understanding of information research when he describes the “heart of the iSchool movement,” which recognizes that information problems “will cross existing disciplinary boundaries, and the best chance of progress is yielded by collective and interdisciplinary efforts” (Dillon, 2012, p. 270). The Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), in turn, lists interdisciplinarity as one of its core values. Like the iSchool movement, it recognizes that the “issues and solutions addressed by ASIS&T must be informed by expertise from various disciplines” (“About ASIS&T”, n.d.) [5].

While the term interdisciplinarity is sometimes used interchangeably with words like *multidisciplinarity*, both highlight a general aspiration for collaboration that spans disciplines (e.g. Chang, 2018; Chua and Yang, 2008; Dillon, 2012; Osborne, 2015). Research on information literacies involved in interdisciplinary inquiries reveals conflicts between scholars’ expectations about how they should conduct their work, indicating possibilities for greater inventiveness in modes of scholarly communication, open-endedness in practices, and strategies for understanding shifts and stabilizations in cross-disciplinary norms and vocabularies (Gullbekk, 2016). The term *interdisciplinary* itself, however, is contested when it comes to representations of the field. Michael Buckland, for example, observes that:

Being interdisciplinary is widely considered to be a good thing and sometimes it is [. . .] Nevertheless, words beginning with “inter” commonly imply a position of weakness (e.g. interval, intermission, interregnum, and interim) and indicate something positioned inbetween other more substantial entities. (Buckland, 2012, p. 5)

Dorte Madsen highlights the pervasiveness of this perception of interdisciplinarity as weakness in Information Science, noting that “[s]eeing the discipline as weak is part of a myth, fueled by the ideal of a unitary discipline” (Madsen, 2016, p. 2698). The view of interdisciplinarity as a weakness problematizes its role in the identity narratives that define information research. There is a sense that the field’s identity, in aspiring to encompass the fullness of interdisciplinarity, actually disappears.

But what does this mean for information scholars who have to negotiate this narrative of interdisciplinarity in practice? The keyword connection activity, while a literal language game at a conference workshop, points to a much larger language game [6] that centers around issues of belonging and representation. When asked how they describe the breadth of their research to other administrators on campus, one questionnaire participant wrote that they “focus on [the] interdisciplinary nature of our diverse field but it is a double-edged sword – it is so broad that I often feel it loses any sense of identity” (Questionnaire Participant #7). Presented as a popular value that is “in the DNA of the 65 iSchools,” interdisciplinarity is more than an attribute, it is an invitation to conceive of oneself and one’s work in a particular way (Madsen, 2016, p. 2698). For Frank, stories can exert force through interpellation: “Interpellation most simply means calling on a person to acknowledge and act on a particular identity” (Frank, 2012, p. 49) [7]. In the call and response of associations’ and institutions’ embrace of interdisciplinarity, these representations of information research bring into being what it means to be an information scholar. Understood from this perspective, the word *interdisciplinarity* is both enabling and disabling for scholars who are trying to “hold their own” in different academic communities and institutional settings (Frank, 2012, p. 77). By embracing the word’s interpellation, researchers find themselves navigating multiple disciplinary narratives, and, by extension, multiple sets of conventions that can make it difficult to articulate a coherent sense of identity.

In fact, Madsen notes that measurements of interdisciplinarity are often premised on the logic of traditional disciplines (Madsen, 2016). Researchers have assessed the *interdisciplinary*

status of the field by counting the number of different disciplines represented in a research journal or an academic department (e.g. Chua and Yang, 2008). This approach, however, in itself, does not account for the interdisciplinary “DNA” of researchers themselves. Bibliometric approaches do not show the dilemma of being in-between words— that is, they do not show the difficulty of naming one’s work in a way that evidences its interdisciplinary nature without undercutting it. This paper, for example, represents a hybrid between humanities and social science norms in scholarly writing. Consequently, it challenges some of the conventions associated with both, which can make it difficult for researchers of either paradigm to recognize its features as part of a familiar genre. In order to be interdisciplinary we have had to identify with recognizable disciplines, but the very act of identifying with these disciplines and their vocabularies means that the non-traditional nature of the work could go unrecognized. Thus, the problem: How do we answer the call to be interdisciplinary researchers when we cannot adequately express interdisciplinarity without resorting to the language of traditional disciplines? How do we navigate the language game of belonging to a particular community of scholars while accurately representing the way our work subverts the rules that govern it?

Negotiating “canon”: “What does the [keyword] make narratable?” (Frank, 2012, p. 75)

The above questions, which emerged during some of the conversations associated with the keyword connection activity, became a focus of the interactive panel discussion that followed. One participant raised the issue of framing one’s work so it appears “in-scope” for a conference. This observation points to the fact that, while the field of information research aspires for interdisciplinarity, tensions emerge when navigating the practical challenges of finding the right language that will gain one acceptance into conferences, journals, communities, and departments. This participant noted the difficulty of conforming to the language of a discipline in order to gain acceptance, while remaining open to new ideas. In many cases, it seems, the concept of interdisciplinarity lacks transparency; it promises openness, but, at the same time, also acts as a gate-keeper. There are different kinds of interdisciplinarity and these different understandings can conflict with one another. The experiences of various participants in the iWords workshop suggest that it is possible to fit within the scope of information research, without actually fitting in the field. Embracing the call to be interdisciplinary is not without its complications.

Of course, as different workshop participants were quick to point out, this problem is not unique to information research. The commonality of the issue, however, does not detract from its significance to the field. If Bates is correct in her assessment that “[i]nformation science is the study of the gathering, organizing, storing, retrieving, and dissemination of information,” then the practice of employing the concept of interdisciplinarity to organize a field of research is an issue of importance (Bates, 1999, p. 1044). The professional practices through which scholars gather, organize their academic units, store, retrieve, and disseminate their work, fall under the self-proclaimed purview of information research. This point, when made in the course of the workshop, led one of the panelists to remark that, “the cobbler’s children have no shoes.” This colloquialism spoke to experiences that undermine representations of the field as a cohesive body. These experiences include the seemingly ironic struggle information scholars face when trying to organize the field. Bates notes that “[m]ost people outside our field do not realize that there is a content to the study of form and organization” and “this is one of the chief reasons our field is commonly thought to have no ‘there’ there” (Bates, 1999, p. 1045, emphasis in original). Our discussions at the iWords workshop, however, suggest that the difficulty of defining the “there” of information research is not limited to outsiders; on the contrary, it is also felt by supposed insiders. Moreover, it is what keeps would-be insiders on the outside.

This discussion of insider/outsider experiences transitioned to the question of *canon*. Establishing a canon was presented as one way of creating a “there” for information research—

a collection of foundational scholarship that one panelist suggested information scholars could draw boundaries around. This panelist and one of the other panelists cited the names of prominent information scholars as a means to locate their work within the field, identifying as “Bucklandian” or “Batesian.” And yet, the notion of a canon was not uncontested. Responding to the panelist’s suggestion that we draw canonical boundaries around different research publications (e.g. JASIS&T), another workshop participant pointed out the limitations that come with the creation of a canon, particularly when it comes to the international claims associated with the field. This scholar shared her own experience of international exchange, which provided evidence that the notion of canon is not universal across cultures. The concept of canon was debated as both a potentially unifying foundation for newcomers to information research and something that would inevitably lead to the exclusion and marginalization of different areas within the field.

Extending the cobbler analogy, if an intellectual canon was a pair of shoes, one size would definitely not fit all information researchers. That being said, one of the panelists was quick to point out that when it comes to issues of disciplinary identity, some scholars would prefer to have ill-fitting shoes than to walk around barefoot. This panelist, along with one of the others, suggested that researchers remove the term interdisciplinarity from the field to help avoid confusion concerning its identity. The third panelist, however, raised the concern that removing this term would contribute to the invisibility of different work (e.g. humanities and design) and therefore have drawbacks for scholars whose work falls outside typical research approaches. Canon, therefore, presents another interesting keyword for the purpose of this inquiry. The debate surrounding whether or not there should be a canon for information research impacts how scholars construct a sense of the field’s identity and their own. On the one hand, a “canon” would make narratable some of the insider information that provides scholars with common ground for interacting with one another, that is, it would provide a common set of reference points or principles with which to orient oneself.

Questionnaire participants also reflected on this question inviting consideration of whether there is – or should be – a shared body of knowledge to gather around. One iSchool head suggested that some shared areas of knowledge serve as grounds for respecting different approaches to research:

Given the wide range of disciplines, I think it’s important to have a shared body of knowledge to help faculty (and students) maintain respect for the methods/approaches/findings in each other’s disciplines. I would go further and say that our PhD students should be able to TA/teach any of our core courses at the undergraduate/master’s levels (Questionnaire Participant #1).

Explicitly identifying a canon, in this respect, could uncover hidden, yet common, assumptions related to what every information scholar “should know” and be able to do. If these assumptions are not made narratable, and therefore visible, they can become barriers for scholars who are trying to build their careers in a field that is highly interdisciplinary. In doing so, it might expose some of the underlying assumptions that impact evaluations related to the scholarly practices of the field, such as teaching, publication, and conference participation.

At the same time, the very act of making some knowledge more visible creates a hierarchy that can marginalize the significance of work that falls outside the boundaries drawn by canon, thereby making it difficult for scholars to “hold their own” (Frank, 2012, p. 77). As the one workshop participant’s comment implied, a canon may further solidify an Anglocentric focus, exacerbating the exclusion of other languages and cultures in the information community. If researchers become too caught up in reifying a certain body of knowledge, we risk limiting the dialogues that take place within the field by making it difficult for others to participate. This could, in turn, have a reductive effect on the diversity within information research. The “fear” associated with the keyword “canon,” therefore, parallels the “desire” it

animates. Both fear and desire for a standardized body of knowledge are about communication and connection. Participants who expressed support for a canon, appeared to do so out of a desire to establish a shared foundation for dialogue. Alternatively, people who expressed concern about the creation of a canon, appeared to do so out of a desire to prevent it from becoming a barrier to dialogues within the field.

These different interpretations concerning the usefulness of a canon in information research are worth considering in conversation with other questionnaire responses we received from iSchool faculty heads. In response to the question, “Can you speak to whether there needs to be a shared body of knowledge among faculty within your iSchool unit?” All of the nine participants implied that there did need to be, or there was an effort to establish, a shared body of knowledge *at some level* within their units, although different participants expressed that this had been pursued with varying degrees of success. One head, for instance, stated: “We’ve tried. Haven’t gotten there” (Questionnaire Participant #3). Another participant explained that shared knowledge “is not necessary in general, but when there is a shared body of knowledge it is easier for communication among us” (Questionnaire Participant #2). While this head did not consider shared knowledge necessary among all faculty within their unit, they “prefer[red] the shared body of knowledge at least among the research and specialization teams” (Questionnaire Participant #2). The concept of “research and specialization teams” represents an alternative way for faculty to make their work *narratable* to each other within the context of particular groupings (Frank, 2012, p. 75).

The stories interpreted in the questionnaire responses on this issue showcase the ambivalence it creates for information researchers. While six of the nine participants expressed their support for a shared body of knowledge related to research and teaching subject matter in their academic units, another respondent explained how their unit had shifted its focus from shared knowledge to *shared values*. Explaining this shift, this participant wrote:

Early in our modern history (i.e. the re-chartering of our school as an iSchool) we devoted a lot of attention to formulating a common disciplinary orientation – but have largely abandoned this effort in favor of achieving agreement on fundamental values (while allowing multiple methodologies and approaches to flourish). (Questionnaire Participant #4)

This particular response showcases how information researchers have negotiated the issue of shared knowledge or a “canon” in different ways. Like the “research and specialization teams” mentioned by Questionnaire Participant #2, this focus on values represents another linguistic move that can change how information researchers and their units negotiate the language games involved in the conceptualization of their work. There are, as this latter example shows, different *kinds of knowledge* that can be shared. Instead of focusing on “a common disciplinary orientation,” researchers can connect over a shared ethical orientation (Questionnaire Participant #4).

Internationalism and information research: “what is the effect of people being caught up in their own [keywords] while living with people caught up in other [keywords]?” (Frank, 2012, p. 78)

The issue of canon, and the stories of personal experience that emerged in relation to it, point to another grand narrative of information research – its international identity. The iSchool Vision includes “a future in which the iSchool Movement has spread around the world, and the information field is widely recognized for creating innovative systems and designing information solutions that benefit individuals, organizations, and society” (“The iSchool Movement,” n.d.) [8]. Alternatively, the vision of ASIS&T “is to be the preeminent global voice of information science and technology research and its implications for practice” (“About ASIS&T,” n.d.). Perhaps even more so than its interdisciplinary aspirations, this international aspiration points to a concerted attempt to

create a larger identity narrative for information research that makes the field “big.” The bigger the field, the more powerful; information research is not merely framed as a discipline, but as a worldwide “Movement.” One of the workshop panelists echoed this vision when she stated that she would like information scholars to be the go-to consultants when an information problem arises. In the questionnaire, we also encountered statements about the global scope of information research; as one participant suggested, “We describe our mission as helping people use information – with technology – to make a better world” (Questionnaire Participant #4).

The more interdisciplinary and international the field, it seems, the greater its chance of becoming the “preeminent global voice” ([Association for Information Science and Technology, n.d.](#)). And yet, the very idea of a “global voice” is fraught with tensions and contradictions. The word “voice” implies a singularity of mind and purpose, whereas the word “global” suggests the diversity of cross-cultural dialogue, one that, given conflicting worldviews, would appear more cacophonous than harmonious. The Anglicization of major information conferences and research publications, while a means through which to facilitate cross-cultural communication, also limits it. In its desire to be more inclusive and heterogeneous, this vision of the field actually serves to homogenize it. While “global voice” creates a singular representation of information research, a truly global voice, as enacted through international dialogue, would create space for multiple voices. Viewed from this perspective, the story of globalization that underlies international narratives of information research can actually hide different languages and voices within it. The contentious political dimensions of information sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred during the analysis stage of this project, illustrates differing views on how information and technologies should be used to “make a better world” (Questionnaire Participant #4).

On a practical level, then, the stories that emerged around the keyword “canon” raised a number of questions: If information units often agree that a shared body of knowledge is necessary for their faculty, how do scholars begin to navigate the diversity of these environments when preparing for their careers in the field? If there is disagreement at the field level as to whether a “canon” of information research exists, how does the fact that information units expect one potentially limit international diversity? How schools address these questions will determine how *caught up* they are in their own words.

Negotiating “information”: “how does a [keyword] help people, individually and collectively, to remember who they are? How does a [keyword] do the work of memory?” ([Frank, 2012, p. 82](#))

In response to concerns raised in the workshop discussion of “canon,” one of the panelists commented that, “Canon is hard, but identity is easier.” She suggested that researchers in the field begin identity statements by saying: “I am an information scholar focusing on this from a _____ standpoint.” This panelist posited that, “Belonging is the issue, not canon.” This statement illustrates how the term “information” can be used as a keyword through which to assert belonging in the field. This panelist’s approach to identifying oneself as an information scholar highlights the importance of the term *information*, which, though contested, can offer a sense of place (e.g. [Bates, 2009](#); [Buckland, 1991](#); [Furner, 2004](#)). We witnessed this kind of academic positioning when workshop participants conceptualized information/information research during the keyword connection activity. The significance of the word “information” to the field, however, is also apparent in the creation of the “iFederation,” which the iSchools’ Website described as “an informal collaboration between information-related organizations that provides mutual support and coordination” (“[iFederation, n.d.](#)” [9]. The iFederation comprised the iSchools, ASIS&T, and ALISE.

As the iSchool, iCaucus, and iFederation demonstrate, the term “information” is more than a research focus, it is an identity claim. By aligning itself with the popular brand of the lower-

case “i” which has been popularized by Apple and others (e.g. iPod, iMac, iPhone, etc.), the field attempts to establish its relevance to popular culture, technological innovation, and contemporary concerns. What is even more revealing about the information field’s attempts to brand the term “information,” however, is the story that accompanies that branding. The term “information,” as it relates to the field of information research, is often associated with the idea of social good. In their efforts to align themselves with the field of information research, information scholars must navigate the tensions of this tendency to valorize it. The vision statements of major information organizations, not to mention academic units, invite researchers to conceive of their work as interdisciplinary, global, and *right*.

According to Frank, this moral focus is a key feature of stories. “Stories,” he observes, “inform people’s sense of what counts as good and bad, of how to act and how not to act” (Frank, 2012, p. 36). In our analysis of questionnaire responses, we noticed that some iSchool heads used a moral orientation when describing how they represent their academic unit to the broader public. One questionnaire participant, for instance, stated that:

We focus on research, service and teaching that combines the creation and use of advanced technologies to help people solve real-world problems, with a strong focus on social good/social justice and information issues. (Questionnaire Participant #1)

Another responded, “We are interested in using information, and the technology that generates and collects this information, to solve society’s problems and increase societal good” (Questionnaire Participant #6). This interpretation of information research as something that solves problems for the betterment of humanity was evident in our workshop as well. As previously mentioned, one of the panelists shared her hope that in the future when information problems arise, information scholars will be consulted as the expert problem solvers. This aim raises one question for deliberation: In a field that comprises global aspirations for solving society’s information problems, whose conception of *good* do researchers strive toward and who determines what counts as just (e.g. Nathan *et al.*, 2017)?

The participant responses above gesture to another story of information research that establishes it as a “societal need” (Buckland, 2012, p. 5). Like the field’s claims to interdisciplinarity and internationalism, this claim to serving the good of society has been central to the iSchool vision statement, including the aspiration of “maximizing the potential of humans” as a process that involves “creating innovative systems and designing information solutions that benefit individuals, organizations, and society” (“About”, n.d.) [10]. There are assumptions here regarding the kind of research scholars conduct and what their work is able to achieve. Ronald Day, for example, demonstrates how these aspirations form part of a rhetoric of information that emerged in the 20th century (2001). According to Day, this rhetoric is problematic precisely because it is often unexamined and accepted as common sense. He notes that:

[. . .] a tradition of values for information has been established and has been, rather uncritically and ahistorically, promulgated as a “good” not only for Western culture but, more troubling, for, and as, “the global.” The point here is not to suggest what information “really is” or is not, nor is it to suggest that information is “good” or “bad,” but rather that certain connotations of information, and the cultural and social privileging of certain technologies and techniques associated with it, are cultural and social productions that elevate certain values over other values and have doomed certain historical events and critiques to oblivion or near-oblivion (Day, 2001, p. 117).

The field’s continued efforts to frame itself around the brand of information means that it is embedded in these problematic social discourses. Information scholars and administrators face the challenge of marketing themselves and their work around the term information, and, in the process, often find themselves appropriating the rhetoric of universal goodness surrounding it.

One can see how this particular interpretation of the keyword information, and the stories it inspires, “work” in certain ways (Frank, 2012, p. 3). By aspiring to “increase societal good”

(Questionnaire Participant #6), information researchers must necessarily make “narratable” a certain understanding of what social good is, and, more specifically, how that social good applies to people’s engagements with information (Frank, 2012, p. 75). There are a number of power relationships at play in the idealization of the information field as a facilitator of social good. The field’s alignment with the branding of a major tech corporation, for instance, suggests its celebration of the industry and consumerism of information-related phenomena. And yet, support for major capitalist-driven organizations potentially conflicts with the interests of consumers themselves, who, in their involvement with such organizations, can become commodified and exploited.

Unavoidable tensions arise when scholars begin to think of the different kinds of societies that exist, and the cultural and political ramifications information research can have in a globalized world. Scholarly and professional associations often articulate a desire to create a space of belonging for information researchers. Yet holding our own within these communities of practice can be complicated (Wenger, 1999). Commenting on the tensions their academic unit has experienced in establishing the unique contribution of iSchools, Questionnaire Participant #7 shared that they “were made to feel very unwelcome” when they joined the iSchools Consortium and noted that they “will probably cancel [their] membership if things continue as they are [because] it is difficult to justify the benefits [they] get from this branding.” While the contextual details that shape this participant’s response are not available, it invites us to think about the disparity between the ideals of the field and scholars’ lived experiences.

As our analysis of some of the discourses surrounding the words “discipline,” “canon,” and “information” show, this disparity extends to the economic considerations associated with employment and funding opportunities, as well as the ethical considerations that come with navigating the tensions of different narrative representations of the field. Frank contends that:

Stories work well at depicting the necessity, the difficulty, and often the danger of choosing how to live. Most stories show people that they must declare themselves, but only some stories make the virtues of commitment seem straightforward, and then only so long as the story is kept in control. (Frank, 2012, pp. 36–37)

The stories we encountered through the iWords project demonstrate the necessity, difficulty, and perhaps even danger involved in the act of naming. The stories surrounding these terms showcase the challenge of committing to certain words and the visions they create, which are anything but straightforward.

Discussion: keywords as small stories

How does understanding the narrative practices surrounding keywords influence our capabilities to represent our identities, the value(s) of our work, and the Information Science field itself? In this inquiry we found that terms like “discipline,” “canon,” and “information” can serve as storytelling devices that influence researchers’ academic opportunities and pursuits. The project helped us uncover the way keywords function as representations of what Alexandra Georgakopoulou refers to as “*big stories*” and “*small stories*” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123, emphasis in original). According to Georgakopoulou, big stories are “fully-fledged stories,” whereas small stories are “[...] a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123). While big stories refer to coherent narratives that attempt to organize a straightforward understanding of one’s experience into a particular interpretation, small stories refer to the often-incomplete narratives that, in some cases, disrupt the coherency of the larger narratives with which they are associated (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Still, keywords are rarely viewed through this narrative lens.

The storytelling practices explored in this analysis are not immediately apparent to those who approach language from a singular perspective.

Madsen highlights the significance of these storytelling practices in her analysis of the different discourses surrounding interdisciplinarity and information research. The names Madsen assigns these discourses, which include “*Hospitality*,” “*Ownership*,” “*Protection*,” “*Danger*,” and “*Survival*,” gesture to the affective dimension of human understanding (Madsen, 2016, pp. 2703–2704, emphasis in original). The discourses that Madsen interprets point to the small stories of individual experience that shape people’s response to the big stories that define the field – they show us that the “requirements of living” out a collective narrative creates frictions (Bruner, 1986, p. 50). The small stories related to the words “discipline,” “canon,” and “information” remind us that the larger narratives of information research, while public and popular, are also personal.

Conclusion: contributions, limitations, and future work

Information scholars must live with stories concerning the interdisciplinary, international, and moral nature of information research. While attending to different scholars’ vocabularies, we learned ways in which keywords are used to construct, retell, and respond to stories, processes that can determine whether an academic unit, organization, or publication is hospitable to researchers. In our writing, we evoke some linguistic practices by which scholars and information schools narrated their identities and negotiated different expressions of the field along with the tensions they produce. The contribution of this project lies in its interactive approach, prompting active and reflexive dialogues on the role of language in information research. Over a half century since the first Information School launched, the challenges of the field’s interdisciplinary claims continue. While these debates about disciplinary identity and terminology are longstanding, we contend that dialogue and storytelling hold fresh possibilities. Such methods can enliven researchers’ imagination in framing their own interests and co-existing with others’ claims about the field.

This project is a step in that direction, through which we trialed our line of inquiry with a small but highly engaged group of individuals in various roles. Viewed as an ongoing conversation among information scholars and professionals, this inquiry welcomes others to join the discussion. The activities and perspectives presented here are intended to serve as resources for scholars, academic units, and organizations looking to foster critical and creative discussion around the role language plays in shaping the identity of information scholars and their research. We present these issues as provocations for future work that follows information researchers’ experiences with keywords using dialogic and narrative methods. Extending this research will involve engaging further with existing interdisciplinary scholarship, contextualizing its relevance to the information field, and developing more comprehensive approaches for exploring scholars’ engagements with keywords in different contexts. As we strive to make our field more hospitable to disciplinary and cultural diversity, and, as we reflect on the values that are driving our different discoveries, it is important that we take time to reflect on the words we use and the stories they make possible.

Notes

1. To view more scholars who think about keywords this way, please consult the collection, *Digital keywords: A vocabulary of information society & culture*, edited by Benjamin Peters (see Peters, 2016).
2. Three of the authors and another researcher associated with the iWords project hosted/participated in the workshop along with the research participants.
3. Frank’s words are adapted by the authors, indicated by square brackets, bringing these questions to the study of keywords rather than stories broadly.

4. Workshop participants' words were gathered by the authors through fieldnotes. Fieldnotes were not verbatim representations of participants' words; as such, the quotes included are close approximations, or variations when uttered by multiple participants.
5. The webpage entitled, "About ASIS&T," was accessed May 9, 2021, prior to a re-design of the iSchools website, retrieved from <https://www.asist.org/about/>
6. For an in-depth discussion of the concept of language games, see philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's work (Wittgenstein and Anscombe, 2001).
7. Frank borrows philosopher Louis Althusser's term *interpellation*.
8. The webpage entitled, "The iSchool Movement," was accessed August 2, 2021, prior to a re-design of the iSchools website, retrieved from <https://ischools.org/The-iSchool-Movement>.
9. The webpage entitled "iFederation," was accessed March 26, 2021, prior to a re-design of the iSchools website, retrieved from <https://ischools.org/ifederation>.
10. The webpage entitled "About," was accessed March 26, 2021, prior to a re-design of the iSchools website, retrieved from <https://ischools.org/About>.
11. The webpage entitled, "Directory," was accessed August 2, 2021, prior to a re-design of the iSchools website, retrieved from <https://ischools.org/Directory>.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix 1**Phase 1: 2018 iWords Workshop (March 25–28, 2018)**

In 2018, we hosted a workshop attended by 22 members of the iSchools community (including four researchers facilitating the study) who consented to participating in this inquiry. Three different engagement activities generated data analyzed in this paper: (1) a keyword connection ice-breaker, (2) an interactive panel discussion, and (3) a word dice game.

Keyword connection ice-breaker

Through this initial activity we asked participants to write down three keywords that describe disciplines related to their research area, along with three keywords relevant to their work. Participants then compared their words, seeking to find distinct and shared terms.

Interactive panel discussion

Several established information scholars offered their remarks through a panel discussion (see [Appendix 2](#)). Panelists shared understandings of links between language use and its implications, contributing expertise on information, creativity, and navigating the field (e.g. in relation to design, metaphors, disciplinary identity, information retrieval, knowledge organization, and translation).

Word dice game

This activity sought to enact the metaphor of the *language-game* by providing participants with the opportunity for critical play with keywords ([Wittgenstein and Anscombe, 2001](#)). Each person wrote down six keywords on a blank dice. Participants selected words they used to describe their own work and experience as information scholars. In groups, participants tossed their dice and were tasked with the challenge of forming connections between keywords. After several rounds, all participants joined in reflections.

Graffiti wall

We set up an interactive space in a common area of the iConference, inviting attendees to contribute their keywords, questions, and observations on sticky notes. The graffiti wall was organized in parallel with the workshop, rather than a core component of it.

Phase 2: Questionnaire of iSchool Heads (July–August 2018)

We invited heads of iSchools to participate in an online questionnaire, using membership lists available on the iSchools Consortium website to recruit participants ("[Directory](#)," n.d.) [11]. This group included deans, directors and program chairs, as there is significant variation in the placement of iSchools within their home institutions. Responses provided insights from heads as they envision and express the identities of their units to those within and outside of their institutions (see [Appendix 3](#)). Of the 83 iSchool heads we contacted, nine responded (11%).

Appendix 2**iWords Workshop panel questions**

- (1) What are your thoughts on the way language influences our ability to communicate across different disciplinary domains and sub-fields of information studies (e.g. information retrieval and knowledge organization)?
- (2) Do you think there would be value in striving for a shared disciplinary vocabulary?
- (3) Do you see opportunities for using a more positive research mentality in this area and how might it shift our understanding of this topic? What steps might we take to reframe the conversation in this light?

Appendix 3

Questionnaire to iSchool Heads

- (1) How do you describe your iSchool to members of the broader public? (e.g. the person next to you on a plane, neighbors)
- (2) How do you describe the breadth of research and teaching within your iSchool to other administrators on campus?
- (3) What terms do you find the most effective when describing work that goes on in your unit?
- (4) Can you speak to whether there needs to be a shared body of knowledge among faculty within your iSchool unit?
- (5) If you think there are key areas of knowledge that need to be represented by the faculty in your iSchool, what are they?
- (6) Can you speak to tensions you have faced in negotiating your iSchool's identity related to establishing the unique contributions of iSchools?
- (7) What are your aspirations for your iSchool in the future? (i.e. What are the key areas you would like to develop and/or strengthen? How would you like to describe your iSchool five to seven years from now?)

Corresponding author

Bonnie J. Tulloch can be contacted at: bonniejoline@gmail.com

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