A Reflection on 30 Years of *Information Research* with Professor Tom Wilson

Crystal Fulton and Tom Wilson

Abstract

Introduction. Professor Tom Wilson created *Information Research in* 1995 as an open access journal for researchers in the field of information science. The journal is now celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, and the leadership of Tom Wilson, Professor Emeritus of University of Sheffield and University of Borås, the original Editor-in-Chief for the last 30 years.

Method. An interview with Professor Tom Wilson explored the development and successes of the journal.

Results. The journal remains one of the earliest journals that has continued over the years in information science. The journal started as a research newsletter, before becoming a fully-fledged journal that is currently owned by the University of Borås' Swedish School for Library and Information Science and hosted by the Swedish National Library's Publicera publication platform.

Conclusion. *Information Research* continues to offer an important scholarly publication venue for researchers, though the nature of the discipline of information sciences may change significantly over the next 30 years.

Introduction

Information Research began publication thirty years ago in 1995 when Professor Tom Wilson envisioned a new model for disseminating research in information science. At a time when journals still focussed on print format, Information Research would exist in the digital realm. Additionally, the journal would have a different approach to publication from traditional paywall journals, instead supporting open science through open access to scholarly outputs. Importantly, the journal provided a home for researchers in information science.

Thirty years later, *Information Research* remains a fully online and open access forum for information science authors to publish their research. While the publication world has consolidated journal holdings and has maintained a paywall approach where authors may have the option to pay significant fees to allow the public free access to their work, Information Research has maintained its presence as authentically open access for authors and readers.

In celebration of the journal's milestone anniversary, the following interview explores Professor Emeritus Tom Wilson's development of *Information Research,* as well as his perspective on the future of the journal as an open access publication in information science.

The Beginning of a New Journal Unlike Other Publications

Crystal Fulton: Tom, thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview today. As the person who founded Information Research 30 years ago, you know everything about this journal.

Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but I have heard that the journal started out as a research newsletter. Is that right?

Thomas Wilson: Yes, that's right. We had in Sheffield the Centre for Research on User Studies, locally known as CRUS. We published a CRUS Newsletter to send out information on the projects the Centre was engaged in. The Centre was funded by the British Library's R&D department and at about the same time as the World Wide Web and HTML emerged, the British library had to withdraw funding for the Centre. The Centre kept going for a little while, but we decided to rename the newsletter Information Research News.

Information Research News was used to disseminate information about research in the department generally, rather than simply in CRUS. And at about the same time, as I say, the World Wide Web emerged, another thing that happened was that the University laid down a financial regulation that you couldn't issue invoices for less than, I think, 25 pounds. And I think the subscription for CRUS News/Information Research News was 10 pounds. We only had about 20 or 30 subscribers, anyway.

With the opportunity offered by the Web, it seemed to me to be sensible simply to make it a free newsletter and to have it disseminated online. So that's what happened. CRUS News became Information Research News, which stopped being a subscription print newsletter and became a free online newsletter.

At that time, it seemed to me that it was possible to change the scholarly publication system because it was so easy to create a publication on the Web. All you had to do was to learn HTML, basic HTML, and you were able to publish. Simple.

And since then, I just fail to understand why academia did not seize the opportunity to transform the scholarly publication system. This potential good, open access, was to be hijacked by the commercial publishers, but at great expense to the institutions. But that was my idea. At the time I felt that this was the way of the future.

And then, having had this thought, I thought, well, why not turn Information Research News into a scholarly journal? In fact, the journal initially reported work done in the department. Then, to try to develop it organically, not establishing it as an open journal, as it were, at the time for submissions. But I started to invite people to papers published in what was now Information Research.

For 2 or 3 volumes, we had papers from the department, plus invited papers from scholars elsewhere, and then I converted it into the standard journal, accepting contributions from everywhere. And you know, publishing openly as it continued to be. So, it was initially a kind of set of unforeseen circumstances, if you like, the withdrawal of money for CRUS, the disappearance of CRUS. The University's financial regulations, the emergence of the Web and HTML, all sort of happened together. And that created in my mind the impetus for open access publishing.

The Critical Choice of Open Access

Crystal Fulton: Information Research has always been and continues to be an open access journal. One of the things that I think is fabulous about the journal is that it is truly open access, as opposed to a form of semi-open access that you find with other journals, where authors may have to pay a publication fee to have open access for their work, or where a subscription is necessary to access a work behind a paywall. How has open access supported the development and influence of information research?

Thomas Wilson: Well, it seems to me that open access isn't open. If you charge a fee for submission. What's open about it? You know, you close off those people who can't afford the fee. So it's not open. The commercial journals are semi- open. They're open at one end and then only for some of the papers, but not at the important end of submission, which is a complete abrogation of open access, properly understood.

Crystal Fulton: And the people involved have all been committed to the notion of genuine open access.

Thomas Wilson: And have been keen to see the journal succeed in that way, whereas a number of journals were started at the same time as Information Research. At about the same time, '95, '96, JISC in the UK had a scheme to support the development of open access journals. I think they've all disappeared. Information Research didn't get any money from that scheme, and, in fact, we've never had any money from anybody until Borås managed to get support from the Nordic organization. I think the difference between the journals that were started under the JISC scheme and Information Research was that Information Research developed, as it were, organically, in the way that I've described, you know, from a newsletter to an online newsletter, to a journal, to an institutionally focused journal, to an open journal. Developing gradually and organically, whereas the journals that were started under the just scheme were started de novo: suddenly there was a new journal in a field. Some of them were taken over by commercial publishers, but I think in general they disappeared.

Crystal Fulton: Wow. This is not just about 30 years of Information Research. The journal has really gone from strength to strength, remaining a journal where others could not continue in this space for one reason or another. That's quite an achievement as well.

Thomas Wilson: Yes, it's kept going, and you know we've never been particularly short of submissions.

Over the years we've had offers from commercial publishers to take it over. The first one was from Taylor & Francis, who in the early 2000s approached me with a view to taking over the journal, and keeping me on as editor in chief, but I couldn't see how they could profit from it without charging

for something. And you know, they were prepared to pay me £5,000 a year as editor. Now, how were they going to recoup that money?

More recently, we've had offers, recently of £100,000 for the Journal. Even more recently, I had a short email conversation with another publisher who, when I said we'd already refused £100,000, came back and said, "We'll offer £200,000." How on earth can they envisage making a profit from the journal, paying that to buy it? They can't maintain a genuine open access journal and pay £200,000 for it.

Crystal Fulton: Well, let's hope that the open access can continue for the next 30 years. Open access is a really important feature of the journal, and I agree I don't see how the journal would remain open access if it were purchased.

Thomas Wilson: Right. No, it wouldn't be possible. They would have to start article processing charges. In my opinion, the journal would then die, because in our field, there isn't the money available to pay article processing charges.

The recent offers have come from what seem to be start-up publishers looking for an established journal with some reputation which can give some credibility to their list. They're publishing 100 journals with titles such as, International Journal of…, and it's evident that they don't have anything of any reputation. Most of their journals are in volumes 1, 2, and 3. They are looking for something to give their list a bit of strength.

A Labour of Love

Crystal Fulton: What are some of your favourite memories of working on information and research?

Thomas Wilson: I don't think I don't think I have any favourite memories, you know. I've just been working at publishing it, editing it, and so forth. The highlights have been its acceptance by Web of Science. So from, I think, volume 8 onwards. Because that took quite a bit of work to get over 2 or 3 years, in fact. Trying to convince the Web of Science. Yeah, I even had Gene Garfield on my side, trying to persuade Web of Science to adopt it, and he was very useful in helping me in that way. Probably without his help it would have taken even longer to get in.

Crystal Fulton: How about the many people you've worked with in our field?

Thomas Wilson: Yes, you know, initially the people I worked with were people I'd met, and people I'd known, and so forth then, but gradually as the as the journal grew, and as the need for more assistance developed, other people came on board that I hadn't met and had never done. And you know I've been enormously grateful to them for the assistance that they've given over the years, because the regional editors, as you will know yourself, are the ones that actually do the work. I do the initial filter, if you like, of things that are submitted but after that the real work is done by the regional editors, and I've always been very grateful for their help in that way, because there's nothing in it for them, I guess.

Crystal Fulton: That's right. It's a labour of love, isn't it?

Thomas Wilson: It is. Yes, I mean it is for all of us, and I think that's the thing that has kept it going.

A Journal about the Information Sciences

Crystal Fulton: What were the topics that the journal explored originally? And how did that develop?

Thomas Wilson: My original idea was that we would cover the information sciences, not just information science. That would include archives, librarianship, information, science, information

systems... Wherever the notion of information could be researched regardless of discipline, we would be interested in publishing. There was no attempt to attract papers on particular subjects. The journal was advertised on the lists and so forth as being open to submissions from all of these areas. We simply took what was submitted. There was no sort of editorial direction of the submissions other than that very general statement. If particular threads developed in the journal, it was more or less accidental.

Crystal Fulton: You also took on proceedings, for example, the ISIC conference, that highlighted topics like information behaviour

Thomas Wilson: We also published the COLIS conference proceedings, and, you know, we've published workshops on bibliometrics. So really, what gets published just depends upon what is offered rather than being directed or managed.

Future Opportunities for *Information Research*

Crystal Fulton: What do you think are the major opportunities for the journal in the future?

Thomas Wilson: Well, I think you know the major opportunity is that in our field I think it's the only genuine open access journal left. There was one that was started about the same time which was published in Australia and migrated to Singapore. But I haven't seen any mention of that recently, so I don't know whether or not it still exists. Of course, you do get information-science-related journals in other languages that are truly open access. For example, journals published in Latin America by the Scielo system. And there are OA journals from different parts of Europe in minority languages. But as an international journal, I think Information Research is the only one. For people who really want to get the work globally recognized, Information Research is the best option and perhaps that's something that should be advertised more. I haven't attempted to do any marketing, as it were, of the journal for some years. But it might be an idea to think of a marketing exercise to promote that particular point. If you want a global reputation, here is the journal that can get you that.

Crystal Fulton: What impact will new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), have on academic research and publishing?

Thomas Wilson: It's going to have a major impact on the information field. Generally, in all of the information sciences, it's clearly going to have a significant impact. Because systems run on information. That's the raw material. There's an opportunity, I think, for Information Research to play a major role in that area. The problem is that there are AI journals which people will think of submitting to before they would think of submitting to Information Research. So again, I think there's room for a marketing exercise that would seek to convince people in the AI business that preparing papers to reach a wider audience than the specialist might be quite a good idea for them.

Information Science Research in 30 Years

Crystal Fulton: A final question. With your crystal ball in front of you, what do you think information science research will look like in 30 years' time?

Tom Wilson: Whoa! 30 years' time. Wow! Well, I shall be long gone by then. What will it look like in 30 years' time? Well, I think that information science as a research field will probably have morphed into something else by then. I can't see it surviving as an attempt at a discipline. It's never managed to establish itself as a discipline. And everything that we've been interested in, you know, from librarianship onwards is gradually being transferred into other disciplines. So, for example, health information has morphed into health informatics and health information behaviour research is now done to a greater extent by medical researchers than it is by information researchers. Information retrieval is now a computer science discipline, not an information science discipline. And increasingly, it will be an AI discipline rather than computer science generally. So,

once upon a time librarians were the only ones interested in information, the only ones really handling information. But with the invention of the computer, and particularly the PC network everybody is interested in information because costs became associated with it. The costs of manually handling information in organisations were simply lost in the salary bill. And they didn't require any machines to help them. This handling was all on paper. But then, when the mainframe and then the PC. Network came into organisations, they were suddenly faced by the fact that handling information now had massive costs associated with it. It wasn't lost in the salary bill. And, as a consequence of that, every discipline and every practice area became interested in information phenomena. And that has translated itself into the various disciplines that we've been talking about: information systems, computer science, communication studies, sociology and so on and so forth.

When I look at who cites my papers, for example, they come from every discipline under the sun. This is why there were so many citations. Because now everybody reads those papers about information behaviour. If they're doing any information behaviour research of any kind in any discipline. I don't see information science (IS) surviving as an academic subject. The only schools that have any chance of surviving, I think, are the iSchools that have diversified to the greatest extent. and not all the iSchools fit that bill. And most of the library schools in the UK have disappeared anyway. As a result of the austerity programme which killed the market for undergraduate programmes. And so, the journal, in order to survive in that situation, has to sell itself to all disciplines. Now, if it does that, it'll survive for another 30 years.

Crystal Fulton: As you have said, librarians were in charge of the information at first, but they're not necessarily there anymore, with changes, such as community libraries replacing public libraries in some areas like the United Kingdom.

Thomas Wilson: The situation varies, you know, with different countries. In Sweden, public libraries are still very strong and there's still strong community support for them, whereas that community support seems almost to have disappeared in the UK, apart from the volunteers who are keeping some of the branch libraries open; my local library, for example, is now run by volunteers.

Crystal Fulton: The community run library is different, with a volunteer approach to collections, programming activities, etc. This is different from library degree training to offer expertise in public libraries.

Thomas Wilson: The other thing, of course, is as the technology develops - I mean, we've already seen that libraries no longer want the kind of generic librarian. They want people who can specialize in particular areas. And they also want computer people to run the computer systems and so the day of the generic librarian, I think, has gone.

Crystal Fulton: You can't possibly wear every hat that's required in the library. You can't do everything, can you?

Thomas Wilson: No. I think if schools are to survive, they've got to look at that. What is the pattern of recruitment that libraries are now looking for? Develop programmes of specialization that can fit the niches, rather than the generic librarian. But I could see programmes that focused on reader support, information literacy and information, behaviour and information, seeking and searching, those kinds of areas, and then another programme for technical support which develops more of an information systems direction for people, perhaps a general management track which focused on developing people who could take team leader roles and things like that in libraries. I think the potential is there to do these things if people think about it a bit.

Conclusion

Crystal Fulton: Is there anything else you'd like to highlight about 30 years, the 30th anniversary of the journal, and 30 years of your leadership of that journal?

Thomas Wilson: Well, it's been an interesting voyage.

Crystal Fulton: Yes, when you think of how other journals don't or cannot continue, it is amazing that Information Research has persevered.

Thomas Wilson: Yeah, but you know a lot of it is down, as I said before, not to me, but to the regional editors that we've had over the years, because they've also been advertising the journal, promoting the journal independently and without that kind of enthusiasm it wouldn't have survived. And of course, the fact that the regional editors are people who are widely known in the community is also beneficial, because other people think well, if X is prepared to devote their time to this then there's something serious going on. So, the regional editors have been central, I think, to the success of the journal.

Crystal Fulton: This has been informative. Thanks for your time, today, Tom.

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Professor Tom Wilson, Founder of *Information Research* and Editor-in-Chief Emeritus, is Professor Emeritus of the University of Sheffield, and of the University of Borås. Tom's principal research areas are information seeking behaviour and information management, in which he has researched and published extensively. He is one of the most cited authors in the field of information behaviour. He founded Information Research in 1995 and self-published it until 2017, when he transferred ownership to the University of Borås. He acted as Editor-in-Chief throughout this period. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Gothenburg in 2005, and a second Honorary Doctorate by the University of Murcia, Spain, in 2010. He was the recipient in 2017 of the Award of Merit of the Association for Information Science and Technology, and in 2020 he was given the Jason Farradane Award by the UK e-information Group of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. He can be contacted at wilsontd@gmail.com

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