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Paul G. Zurkowski and information literacy: On his trip to the first European Conference on Information Literacy

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Introduction

The following are short excerpts from a series of interviews with information pioneer Paul Zurkowski that took place over the course of eleven days from Thursday 17th October until Sunday 27th October, 2013. The interviews were conducted in Washington, DC, and Istanbul, Ephesus and Cappadocia, Turkey. The complete interview series will be part of a forthcoming book being written to coincide with the 40th anniversary in November 2014 of Zurkowski coining the phrase, information literacy (IL). The book's working title is *The Untold Story of Paul G. Zurkowski & Information Literacy: 40 Years to the World Stage*.

The excerpts from the interviews are presented here in four parts: Before the conference; pre-conference; during the conference and after the conference.



Figure 1: Mr Information Literacy arrives at the ECIL 2013

Before the conference: The following is an excerpt from the first interview on the evening of Thursday 17th October 2013 at Dulles International Airport, Washington, DC while waiting to board a non-stop Turkish Airlines flight that arrived the next day in Istanbul, Turkey, on the afternoon of Friday, 18th October.

Jeff: Thank you Mr Zurkowski for making yourself available for this series of interviews to be conducted as you prepare to open the first European Conference on Information Literacy (ECIL) with your keynote speech in Istanbul five days hence. I couldn't help but notice that your energy levels belie a man of 80; where do you get all this energy?

Paul: Well thank you Jeff for documenting this important trip to Turkey. I draw energy from knowing that there will be over 300 information professionals from 59 different countries and 5 continents attending this much anticipated four-day event at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. I am also fortunate to be joined by my wife, Peg and my daughter Pam, who is an award-winning nurse and who will be presenting her poster for *Case Studies in Information Literacy for Nurses and Nursing Education* from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA.

Jeff: Are you nervous about your speech?

Paul: No. I enjoy and look forward to speaking to professional groups, especially those with worldwide participation. I have written six versions of this speech trying to hit the right points and in the process have come up with a new title for my speech: *Information Literacy is Dead; Long Live Information Literacy!* [The final title of the speech was *Towards universal information literacy: the economic and social building blocks*. Ed.]

Pre-conference: The following is an excerpt from another interview that took place during the ECIL pre-conference tour to Ephesus, Turkey on 20th and 21st October:



Figure 3. Pre-ECIL conference tour: Paul Zurkowski; librarians from around the world and friends visit the ruins of the Library of Celsus, one of the largest libraries of the ancient world, in Ephesus, Turkey

Jeff: How did you come up with the phrase, information literacy [as used] in your letter to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, USA while you were president of the Information Industry Association Washington, DC so long ago in 1974?

Paul: The explanation is quite simple. Information industry companies found that once information was produced in machine-readable form, they could deliver it in any medium their customers desired. During the fifth year in the life of the Information Industry Association in 1974, we had grown the membership from about 12 original companies to 200. I could see these companies' efforts were changing the fundamentals of publishing and that the population as a whole needed to be

educated in how to make the fullest possible use of the new services. It just made good sense. So I wrote to the Commission urging universal IL training. At that stage, well before mobile phones, desktop computers, or any of the technologies we enjoy today, access to these services was tied to mainframe computers, requiring a very specific skill-set of the users. In my upcoming keynote I renew my request for such training, but limit it to elementary school children, a more achievable idea.

During the conference: The following excerpts are from an interview that took place at the Cultural Centre wing of the Harbiye Military Museum in Istanbul, Turkey on Wednesday, 23rd October:



Figure 2. From left: Peg and Paul Zurkowski with daughter Pam Cacchione in the Inner Garden within the Harbiye Military Museum and Cultural Centre at the opening reception after Mr Zurkowski's keynote speech

Jeff: Now that you've been here at the ECIL for a few days, what is your impression of the conference so far?

Paul: I see it as a watershed moment for IL around the world.



Figure 4. Jeffrey V. Kelly, Serap Kurbanoglu, Paul G. Zurkowski, Maria-Carme Torras, Sonja Špiranec and Pam Zurkowski Cacchione at ECIL 2013

Jeff: What do you think about what Indrajit Banerjee from UNESCO said during his opening speech concerning information *AND* media literacy?

Paul: I wrote about “useful communications media” in my original 1974 paper to the NCLIS. So, I’ve always known the importance of media; how else can a message get through? It makes sense what you say Jeff, that information is the content and the meaning and media is simply the way content, information and meaning is delivered. You cannot have one without the other. Arguing about which is the bigger concept is a waste of time.



Figure 5. Autographs and pictures with Mr. Paul Zurkowski after his successful ECIL keynote on opening night.



Figure 6. Jeffrey V. Kelly, Pam Cacchione and Peg and Paul Zurkowski developing their “experiential literacy” with nature’s vast expanse of “information” all around them in Cappadocia. [Phenomenographically speaking, as ECIL keynote speaker Christine Bruce might say]

After the conference: The following excerpts are from the interview that took place on the Cappadocia, Turkey, ECIL post-conference tour, 25th & 26th October and while traveling home from Istanbul to Washington, DC on 27th October:

Jeff: Now that the conference is over what are your perspectives?

Paul: The conference for me was like a revelation. At times, I felt like an outsider looking in to this wonderful community that I somehow helped create. Being asked for my autograph and posing for picture after picture was truly humbling for me. A very attentive

young volunteer even asked me to sign his conference t-shirt! All the while, I was making friends with many, many informed virtuosi from around the globe.

Jeff: What are some specifics about the conference?

Paul: Co-chairs Serap Kurbanoglu of the department of information management of Hacettepe University and Sonja Špiranec of the department of information and communication sciences of Zagreb University did a fantastic job dreaming up and putting together this seminal event for IL. I am so glad they found me and invited me to be here. The facilities worked very well and the conference was a resounding success bringing the informed virtuosi from near and far. A new age of universal IL is sure to follow this wonderful conference as its major landmark contribution.



Figure 7. Fast friends: Closing speaker, Ralph Catts and Paul Zurkowski meet for the first time on the streets of Istanbul on the way to Cappadocia. Zurkowski said this picture is indicative of the instant connections he felt meeting people from all over the world during the conference.

Jeff: ECIL highlights?

Paul: There were many but one that comes to mind was when Professor Xiaojuan (Julia) Zhang from Wuhan University, school of information management said to me, "You are well known in China...and we have a lot of people!" She said this during another highlight for me, the workshop I led, *Marketing efforts essential to starting your own information business*. Many participants were interested in starting their own business and may contact Association of Independent Information

Professionals (AIIP) president Jocelyn Sheppard. Other highlights were talking with Albert Boekhorst and attending the presentation by Christine Bruce. I would have liked to attend the talks of so many others. I heard the talks by Carla Basili, Ralph Catts and Maria-Carme Torras; [they] were very interesting, as were many others.

Jeff: What is next?

Paul: Well, what good is being information literate if the information or wisdom is not used for good? We have many challenges in the next 40 years and the discipline that comes with IL can be at the forefront of making the world a better place. In my keynote speech, I called for a country-by-country effort as a social building block to do what you, Jeff, are doing in your classroom and teach IL in the primary grades by teaching critical thinking. As you put forth in your ECIL presentation, students can start learning IL through critical thinking at around age seven and that laying the foundation for lifelong learning *and* creating can begin from conception with proper nutrition, healthy brain stimulus and appropriate loving experiences, all to help create information-literate world citizens. Searching Google and cutting and pasting alone do not make IL. When I visited your class of 6th graders, I saw how teaching IL through critical thinking is an "open sesame" to these students to the adult world. They are being launched into their lives as my proposal nearly forty years ago, if implemented, would have been doing ever since. The world would be a better place if that had happened.

Also in my keynote, I called for a mapping of the IL universe somewhat like the Human Genome Project. I hope some from the informed virtuosi take this up. Finally, ways must be found to enable ordinary people to produce and wield countervailing power to effectively restrain the harmful forces of economic inequality, media control and disruptive politics challenging the effectiveness of representative governance, using IL as the framework for discourse and action...for good informed



Figure 8. Autographs, fan photos and an exciting but long trip...and yet this IL pioneer arrives home wheeling his own bags...with a smile.

decision making. I called for a “Coalition for Citizen’s Information Rights and Responsibilities” a junta organized by librarians, who I see as the informed virtuosi to wrest control of the information switches from the power mongers who are doing damage to representative governance. Honest governance is dying and needs to be given an IV injection from the IV (informed virtuosi). I hope to see more of [them] in Dubrovnik, Croatia, for ECIL 2014. Remember, a future for IL is not inevitable. Long live IL!

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