

Social information science and the school library

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the correlation between Social Information Science and the school library by expanding the social activities of the school library and building a unique self-help section. This new section will include direct social information as well as belles-lettres for support and encouragement. A model of such a section was built in 1996 in a school library in Or Yehuda, Israel. It was very successful. Most of the pupils expressed interest in the new section: there was a significant increase in reading, mainly among the boys. The subjects that most of the young readers were interested in were: general teenage problems, death, and sex. The new section became an attractive part of the library and of the whole school. Building such a section in schools will expand the activities of the librarian and increase the social contribution of the library to the community.

During the last decade, the main concern of librarians and information scientists has been new information technology and its impact on libraries and study methods. These subjects are of the utmost importance as we approach the 21st century. This paper will discuss another aspect of the information revolution – the social humanistic aspect – an important subject which is sometimes neglected.

In the 15th century, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, he was unaware of its far-reaching effects. He was not familiar with the "pocket book," the daily newspaper and bureaucratic paperwork. Gutenberg died a poor man, but his invention conquered the world. Communication between people expanded, education developed and the printed book began to shape the world of human imagination and creativity. But all these developments were coincidental without a guiding hand (Febvre & Martin, 1976; Eisenstein, 1979). Now, we are once again living in a period of technological revolution destined to change humanity. In contrast to the Gutenberg period, we have all the academic tools with which to ask how can we use this revolution to improve the world, to advance science and communications, and to avoid violation of personal privacy and destruction of individuality. The past 100 years have seen the rise of the study of the social sciences: psychology, sociology, criminology, education, and others. These fields, which did not exist in Guttenberg's day, allow us, at least partially, to regulate and plan the information revolution.

The purpose of this lecture is to discuss one aspect of the information revolution —Social Information Science and its application in the school libraries. During the past three years, I have been developing at Bar-Ilan University a new scientific branch of studies within the

field of information studies and librarianship—"Social Information Science." In 1996, I published a book on this subject, named: *Social Information Science. Love, Health and the Information Society: The Challenge of the 21st Century* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press). This new field deals with the research, development and application of all the different aspects connected to the transfer and supply of social and medical information: information retrieval and processing, information needs of different groups in society, the ethics of providing social information, special data bases for social information, and the development of new institutions and professions, such as, "social and medical information banks" and the "Social Information Scientist." The rationale behind the establishment of this field is supported by research findings from the fields of medicine, psychology and library science.

The new field is based on three factors which can be integrated: social needs for information and support, advanced information technologies, and human knowledge. The latter refers to "direct information," such as the names and addresses of institutions, and to "supportive knowledge," found in literature and poetry. The main idea behind the development of "Social Information" is the assumption that man in modern society needs social and medical knowledge in order to function properly. However, he needs not only informative knowledge but also supportive knowledge which provides insight and support, such as the knowledge found in literature. The intent is to create a new professional—the Social Information Scientist—who will build the appropriate libraries in hospitals, nursing homes and rehabilitation centers. He will also set up "self-help sections" in public and school libraries, and manage central banks for social and medical information (Baruchson Arbib, 1996).

The scientific basis for this field is an interdisciplinary approach which integrates the fields of psychoneuroimmunology, bibliotherapy, and advanced information technology. Psychoneuroimmunology, which was developed in the University of California at Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.), studies the influence of the emotional state on the immune system. Today there is scientific evidence based on comparative tests that a person's emotional state has a significant influence on the body's immune system and healing ability. Being in a state of security, faith and happiness enhances man's health and improves his level of functioning (Ornstein & Sobel, 1987; Cousins, 1989; Vollhardt, 1991). The second field, bibliotherapy, has been known since the previous century (1846) but was recognized as a branch of librarianship only in 1939, when the Bibliotherapy Committee of the American Library Association was established. This field, which is used by psychologists, social workers and hospital librarians, is based on the assumption that with the help of the right book, man can draw comfort, support and gain new insight; in addition, he can discover new solutions and identify with a figure who has been in similar situations. All of these factors do not ensure a cure but they give encouragement, support and allow a new line of thought to emerge (Brown, 1975; Rubin, 1978; Hynes McCarty, 1986; Gold, 1990; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993).

The third factor, information technology, has exposed us to new technological means that include social and therapeutic aspects, such as social/medical data bases, Internet sites on healthy living, and computerized means to facilitate the functioning of the disabled person, as seen in the comprehensive book by J. Lazzaro (1993), that studies adaptive technologies for learning work environments. Lazzaro discusses, among other things,

talking computer systems for blind people, electronic mail for the deaf, and computer systems for the benefit of the physically handicapped.

The integration of these three factors—psychoneuroimmunology, bibliotherapy and advanced information systems, enables creating a new professional branch of study within the field of librarianship which I have named "Social Information." Modern man has become more aware of his need for information. During the last few years, new disciplines have developed, such as "patient education" and "preventive medicine" (Brawley, 1983; Tolsma, 1993). Modern man is searching for appropriate information and is entitled to it, as R. Gann, who studied health consumer needs, says: "People are no longer content to be told what is good for them. They want access to information which will enable them to weigh risks and benefits and to make informed choices between options in health care ..." (Gann, 1992, pp. 545-555).

Some of the ideas presented in the framework of "Social Information" are not new. Since the existence of mankind, man has found support in the Bible, the New Testament, the Koran, and the philosophy of Buddha. The world is aware of the importance of social projects and therefore there are information and referral services in libraries (Childers, 1983), information centers in hospitals, self-help books (Hunt, 1988; Rees, 1991; Ellis, 1993), and volunteer groups to assist in hospital libraries with the use of books (Schneider, 1987; Parikh & Schneider, 1988; Adeney, 1990). But what is the innovation in this field? The innovation is mainly in the integration of the whole range of factors, and their transformation into a new academic discipline within the field of information studies and librarianship, and the creation of a new professional, the "Social Information Scientist" who will undergo special training in librarianship schools. Another important aspect is the integration of direct information, with which can help to locate the name of an institution or person, or details about a social or medical problem; and supportive knowledge, which is designed to give man the emotional strength needed for coping. In this short lecture it is impossible to elaborate on all the aspects of the new field, including its problems, limitations and potential success. In this framework I will concentrate only on the possible connection between Social Information and the school library.

The school library is known as a place where children and teenagers draw their knowledge of most cultural branches: humanistic studies, languages and scientific studies. There the youngsters absorb cultural values and knowledge which accompany them for the rest of their lives. But in addition to the educational aspect of the school and library, there is another function, and that is to train pupils to take an active part in a healthy and constructive society, a society which champions moral values and respect for the individual. During the years that a child learns in school, he copes with personal and social problems, some of which are ordinary and natural, such as learning difficulties, parent-child relations, growing up and sexuality. But sometimes he must also cope with more unusual problems, such as the divorce of parents, a death in the family, or serious health problems, such as a physical handicap, dyslexia, and others.

The social function of schools are fulfilled by teachers, educational advisers and psychologists. However, the school library can also become a focal point for social assistance and support. The main idea is to establish a special "self-help section" in the school library (Baruchson Arbib, 1997). This section will include direct information on problems of interest to youths, along with literature, movies and poetry that can provide

the readers with a new insight and alternative solutions to solve their problems. During the lecture, the characteristics of such a section, based on an experiment that was conducted in two schools in Or Yehuda, Israel, will be discussed. The Israeli experiment was a great success, especially since it led to more openness and awareness of the pupils to their problems as well as contributing to an increase in the amount of reading.

The "self-help section" in the Arazim and Pardess schools was established by my student, Vicky Atar Hornstein, and here are some of the main findings of the project: The section was set up, as I mentioned, in the joint library shared by the two schools. The pupils from these schools came from a low socioeconomic background, where the parents were not conscious of the importance of reading, and usually did not have the economic ability or the desire to buy books for their children.

The model was tried out on 7th, 8th, and 9th graders. The "self-help section" was set up in a distant corner of the library, hidden away from the view of the pupils using the reference room. The purpose was to create an intimate place that would allow personal and private study and quiet conversations. The section was planned as an aesthetic and attractive place. In order to avoid making the pupils feel uncomfortable or reserved about using the new section, the use of the name "self-help section" was purposely avoided, and a more attractive name was given: "You and I will change the world." Like in any new project, there was a need for marketing, and the section was advertised to both the pupils and teachers. A colorful advertisement was displayed before the pupils, in the style of "everything you wanted to know about ... you can find in" The teachers were presented with a brochure which included information on the scientific background of the activities, the targeted audience, and types of activities to take place.

The subjects chosen were: problems connected to adolescence, drugs, sex, divorce, death, mental and physical handicaps, and social adjustment. The recommended book list was made up of several components: a) the leading and most popular books on the subject, as appearing in the book by Adir Cohen on bibliotherapy (1990); b) books that were already read, and were therefore popular and familiar. Many of the books were literary works and only some were direct information books.

The books were displayed in the section in a very attractive and not the usual manner. Each shelf represented a different subject, and the books on the shelf were arranged with their covers facing the readers, like the way new magazines are displayed. Each subject was assigned its own color and a label was affixed on each book according to the color of the subject along with a label with a few words about the book content.

Books were loaned for periods of two weeks, or longer if a pupil requested so. A special box was hung in which pupils could put questions for the educational adviser. Every month, a specific topic was focused on, with a wider range of activities offered, including a video movie, newspaper reading, and a teacher-led social hour. The first topic chosen was "Yes to tolerance; No to violence."

The section's activities could have been expanded by adding additional projects with the cooperation of the pupils and teachers, but since this was a preliminary stage, we decided to allow the natural process to develop on its own and then examine the results.

What were the main findings after a year of observation? There was a significant increase in the number of readers (32%) in most of the subjects found in the section, not including the

subject of sex. (In the area of sex, there were many books stolen or lost, indicating heightened interest in this subject). The most significant increase was in the area of typical teenage problems (83%), death (67%) and drugs (59%).

A strong connection was found between age and increase in reading. The greatest increase was among 9th graders (178%), perhaps because they were older and more aware of the subjects mentioned above. A connection was also found between the sex of the reader and increase in amount of reading. In this library, girls generally comprised the greater part of the reading population, but in the new "self-help section," there was an increase of 123% in reading among the boys, as opposed to an increase of 14% among the girls. As for the quantity of readers, the girls read more than the boys—177 girls as opposed to 69 boys, but the rate of increase among the boys is most significant. The boys were interested mainly in the following subjects, listed in order of importance: problems of adolescence (increase of 500%), divorce (increase of 500%), and drugs (increase of 200%). With the girls, the model influenced mainly the following subjects: death (increase of 60%), teenage problems (increase of 59%), and drugs (increase of 33%).

The section turned into an attractive corner in the library, not only for borrowing books, but also for quiet conversation. In one aspect, the section was a failure: not one pupil turned to the educational adviser and the question box remained empty. Apparently there was fear of overexposure, of becoming stigmatized as a "person in distress" turning for help.

This model is just one example. The creativity of the librarian and his connections with the school management and the teachers can create somewhat different models. In the current case, there was openness on the part of the school administration and the success of the project can also be credited to the chosen location, the aesthetic aspect and the discretion used.

Building a "self-help section" is one of the contributions of "social information" to the community. Turning a school library into a social information center is important for the pupils, teachers and librarians. Before I explain this importance, I would like to emphasize that I am not talking about the usual conservative information and referral services, but rather about a dynamic, attractive and active model which includes not only information but also literature. The "self-help section" enhances the awareness of the pupils to important social subjects—subjects they come across in daily life at home and at school. Such a section also acts as a pipe to channel energy and pressures for pupils who have to cope with social and medical problems. It legitimizes the existence of their problems and offers them new solutions or a new point of view in dealing with them. The "self-help section" can also serve the teaching and advisory staff and supply them with all new information and new literature in the areas concerning teenage problems.

Establishing a "self-help section" will also open up new professional opportunities for the librarian and a new area for self-fulfillment. In addition to his involvement with management, organization and technological information, if he will be aware of the social angle, he can become involved in the creative development of the section, paying special attention to the more sensitive, human problems, while also relating to other aspects of librarianship, such as bibliotherapy, information therapy, and architecture as a tool to improve social service.

There is a chance that the "self help section" will have success, especially in communities where there are no public libraries or community centers and the children spend most of their time in school. The dedication of part of the librarian's time to the social angle, will make an important contribution to the pupils, and as already mentioned, will also expand the librarian's range of activities. It should be emphasized that the sections's book collection can be increased by the use of data bases and interesting Internet sites. True, the school library is a teaching and learning center but it can also make an important contribution to educating the individual for a healthy life.

We live in an era of vast technological development and there is concern that the traditional library can lose a great deal of its value as the acquisition of knowledge becomes more accessible at home through computer communication. Turning the library also into the school's social center will expand its activities from being a place of providing knowledge to a place for acquiring support, understanding and identification. Thus, the library will take on a new, attractive angle, and it will continue to exist successfully as a social institution that contributes to the social needs of the community.

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