

Leisure's Growing Importance as a Research Area in Library and Information Science

Robert A. Stebbins



Professor Robert A. Stebbins, with over 35 years in leisure studies, has pioneered the ideas of 'serious leisure', 'casual leisure', 'project-based leisure' and 'optimal leisure'. He is currently Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Calgary. Author of 37 books and monographs in several areas of social science, his most recent works bearing on these ideas include: *Between Work and Leisure* (Transaction, 2004); *Challenging Mountain Nature* (Detselig, 2005); *A Dictionary of Nonprofit Terms and Concepts* (Indiana University Press, 2006, with D.H. Smith and M. Dover); *Serious Leisure: A Perspective for Our Time* (Transaction, 2007); *Personal Decisions in the Public Square: Beyond Problem Solving into a Positive Sociology* (Transaction, 2009); *Leisure and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and *Social Entrepreneurship for Dummies* (Wiley, 2010, with M. Durieux). He was elected Fellow of the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 1996 and, in 1999, elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and has been a member of LSA since 1995.

Stebbins's main leisure interests lie in amateur music, where he is a jazz and classical double bassist, and in various outdoor hobbyist pursuits, notably cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking and mountain scrambling (hiking to mountain tops). He is also an active volunteer in the Calgary French community, primarily as President of the *Centre d'accueil pour les nouveaux arrivants francophones* (an organization that helps French-speaking immigrants settle in Calgary). And, to be sure, casual leisure counts as well. For Stebbins it consists mainly of evening conversations with friends and family and dining out in Calgary's restaurants.

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In the past we have heard the occasional lament about the presumed failure of leisure studies scholars to get the word out to the wider world concerning what they have learned about leisure. Samdahl and Kelly (1999), for example, observed that far too often we fail to familiarize that world with our theory and research, be that world other academic and applied disciplines or the general public. More generally, Susan Shaw (2000) wrote that, when we do try to talk to people outside leisure studies, no one listens. Then, in 2010, UNESCO jettisoned leisure as a priority in its programs of development, such activity now being reinterpreted by this organisation as a comparatively trivial aspect of culture. From past experience, WLO [World Leisure Organisation] understands that leisure is not accepted as a tool for development internationally or within the UN institutions and agencies. Leisure, per se, is still perceived as less important than "serious" matters, such as poverty reduction" (Thibault, 2011, pp. 341-342).

Yet, many a scholar and practitioner working in, among other fields, tourism, therapeutic recreation and, more recently, event analysis — where leisure studies has had a noticeable presence for a significant number of years — belie everything claimed in the preceding paragraph. Moreover, many people in leisure studies know about the role of their inter-discipline in these areas, with some of them participating regularly in their conferences and with some of them even being administratively joined in university departments and faculties. Leisure is also cutting an ever bigger figure in the fields of gerontology and retirement, arts and science administration and quality of life and well-being. These latter three extensions of leisure studies seem less recognized among leisure researchers than those leading into the first three, but this collective perception might change with time.

All this suggests that leisure is far more important in world culture than UNESCO is presently willing to admit. All the aforementioned fields bear directly on human psychological and social development. Thus, the world over, there are people needing therapeutic recreation, arts establishments needing information on the interests of their clientele, and governments worrying about the well-being of their citizens. Moreover, leisure is a cultural universal (Chick, 2006, pp. 50-51). It is therefore myopic for UNESCO, or any other international organisation having a similar mandate, to abandon (or fail to embrace) leisure's enormous potential for human development.

This act of jurisdictional dereliction is magnified still further when we consider the prominent role of information in modern life as manifested in every corner of the planet. We have been living in the Information Age for some time (Rifkin, 2005), with information now being produced at an ever dizzying rate and disseminated ever more efficiently along the multiple routes of an increasingly diverse information technology. What is more, leisure constitutes one central set of distinctive activities framing both the production and the dissemination of information, a point that the field of library and information studies (LIS) has begun to explore in considerable detail. Few people in leisure studies know of this extension of their ideas into this domain, but its implications for leisure's image as an important sphere of development throughout life are immense.

Library and Information Science

Discussion in this section will be limited to the information and document side of LIS, with scant attention given its library facet, its oldest which dates to the development in the nineteenth century of the Dewey Decimal System and the founding of library science. With reference to information and documents Michael Buckland (2004) has observed that educational programs

in library, information and documentation revolve around what people know. They are not limited to technology and the specialized expertise associated with it. In other words, they differ fundamentally and importantly from computer science programs and from the information systems programs taught in business schools.

Information is therefore knowledge obtained from investigation, study, or instruction as it pertains to a particular subject, event, or other matter of interest and which then may be communicated. Marcia J. Bates (1999, p. 1044) defines the field of library and information science as "the study of the gathering, organizing, storing, retrieving, and dissemination of information". Information seekers "must experience a problem situation", which stimulates them to launch a search for knowledge that will solve the problem (Ross, 1999). In leisure, most generally put, information is any knowledge however acquired that informs the pursuit of a free-time activity. This includes what Ross calls the serendipitous encounter of information and other material, information that turns out to relate in important ways to the lives of the participants. That is, they sometimes become involved in 'finding without seeking'.

Bates points out that LIS cuts across several conventional academic disciplines, as its researchers engage in such 'processes' as information seeking, teaching, and learning. This is done along lines of various 'domains', or universes of recorded information, which are developed and retained for later access. Leisure is one of the newer domains to be examined from the LIS perspective. More generally, library and information science is both a pure and an applied science, with the latter being concentrated on the development of services and products for specialties like journalism and library science.

Of the various core concepts in LIS, that of *information behaviour* is especially relevant for leisure studies. Donald Case (2002, p. 76) observes that it captures a range of information related phenomena, many of which, like serious leisure, have only recently come to the attention of information scientists. He argues that, whereas some researchers conceive of information behaviour narrowly in reference only to information seeking activities, a majority follow Wilson's (1999, p. 249) conceptualization, namely, that information behaviour is the "totality of human behavior in relation to the sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use". As Pettigrew, Fidel, and Bruce (2001, p. 44) put it, information behaviour centers on "how people need, seek, give, and use information in different contexts".

One of the academic disciplines with which LIS has recently come in contact is that of leisure studies. Jenna Hartel (2003) pioneered the meeting of the two fields. She pointed out that, historically, LIS has leaned heavily toward studying scholarly and professional informational domains, while largely ignoring those related to leisure. In an attempt to help redress this imbalance, she introduced the study of information in hobbies.

In some forms of leisure, serious leisure beckons the information behavior community to take leisure seriously, to descriptive and classificatory elements illuminate, isolate, and stabilize serious leisure subjects so that information research can occur rigorously and systematically. This opens an exciting and virtually unexplored frontier for the library and information studies field (p. 316)

All of leisure, serious, casual, and project-based (Stebbins, 2007), may be examined for its library and informational forces and properties as these relate to a particular core activity and the social and cultural milieu in which it is pursued. It is known that the patterns of storage, retrieval, and dissemination vary considerably from one core activity to another. Hartel's work explored these patterns in the

hobby of cooking. Other researchers have examined, for example, information use and dissemination among backpackers (Chang, 2009) and coin collectors (Case, 2009). Further theory and research on LIS and the serious leisure perspective are reported in *Library Trends*, v. 57, no. 4, 2009.

Information's Place in Leisure

The concept of information behaviour makes a major explanatory contribution to the study of leisure by centering attention on how participants need, seek (and retrieve), give (disseminate), and use (including storage and organisation of) information with reference to different free-time activities and sets of activities. For example, neophytes in golf (beginners in a serious leisure activity) need information on how to improve at the game. They commonly meet this need by seeking advice from manuals often augmented with lessons. They then use this information to work on their game, sometimes telling other neophytes what they have learned. Likewise, someone wanting to make the most of a visit to France or wanting to learn a foreign language has a need for a certain kind of information, seeks it out, subsequently uses it and, not infrequently, tells others about the utility of the information used. Reading a pamphlet, to the extent that this act is agreeable (e.g., a report on the annual evaluation of a nonprofit agency, a written analysis of future directions for a science club), constitutes another instance of information behaviour where the information sought is utilitarian. Hartel's hobbyist cooks reported spending countless hours with their cookbooks and related practical resources following, in effect, the model of information behaviour.

Beyond these links between information behaviour and utilitarian interests, lies the complicated role of both in pleasurable reading. Ross (1999) studied how readers use information to choose (i.e., seek) books for enjoyment. She found that her interviewees 'usually depended on considerable previous experience and meta-knowledge of authors, publishers, cover art, and conventions for promoting books and sometimes depended on a social network of family or friends who recommended and lent books' (p. 788).

Ross concluded her analysis with five emergent themes bearing on the information search process. One, readers are actively engaged in constructing meaning from their material and applying it to themselves (there is also evidence of this for newspaper readers). Two, the affective dimension is critical to readers' involvement with their material, suggesting that information seeking is sometimes, perhaps often-times, more than rational problem solving. Thus, reading material may be reassuring, frightening, infuriating and so forth. Three, readers value the trustworthiness of the recommendations received from others and from impersonal but credible sources of advice on reading (e.g., authoritative book reviews and testimonials). Four, Ross found that reading was framed in a social network of friends and relatives who supported the readers' interests and whose interests the readers tended to support in return. Five, experienced readers chose material using a variety of 'clues' about what to look for. These include knowledge about genres, authors, cover art, and the reputation of publishers. Their memory of reviews and advice from friends served as additional clues.

In other words, there is for information behaviour an affective/evaluative side as well. That is:

- need for information might rest on love, fear, or pleasure/ moral stance (e.g., deviance) or empirical or theoretical requirements;
- information might be sought with intrepidity, anticipation, or curiosity / with a sense of proof or logical fit;

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- information might be used with joy, doubt, or excitement / with sense of triumph, accomplishment, or confirmation; and
- information might be given with anger, hesitation, or conviction / with authoritativeness or impartiality.

Some of these emotions/evaluations are positive, usually part of leisure and the serious pursuits. Others are negative, most commonly being associated with non-work obligation and disagreeable work. Allan Konrad (2007) in attempting to define the essence of LIS argues that its unique and core focus is that of "humans becoming informed (constructing meaning) via intermediation between inquirers and instrumented records. No other field has this as its concern" (Konrad, 2007, p. 660).

Ross, in working to extend the conventional lines of inquiry in LIS, and by using pleasurable reading as a vehicle, suggests a number of ways that information nurtures leisure activities and, in turn, is nurtured by them. In this regard a main contribution of leisure studies, in general, and the serious leisure perspective, in particular, is the capacity of each to offer a framework within which to understand the place of related information in both the lives of individuals and the culture of their larger community.

Conclusions

The data generated in the LIS approach has added and will continue to add significantly to our understanding of leisure activities. Knowing about leisure knowledge, about the gathering, organising, storing, retrieving, and dissemination of information along with the affective/evaluative dimensions of these foci will make an invaluable contribution to leisure studies. At the societal level, information is an important part of all three domains of life, in work, leisure, and non-work obligation. Nevertheless, it is literally or virtually absent in some activities pursued in the latter two. Thus, some casual leisure activities, notably play, relaxation, passive entertainment, sociable conversation, and sensory stimulation, seem to require little or no information to engage in them. In the domain of non-work obligation, mowing the lawn, shovelling the sidewalk, and helping a friend move, for example, also appear to be of this nature. By contrast, all work seems to require information of some kind.

Moreover, in the "serious pursuits" (serious leisure and devotee work combined, Stebbins, 2012), where all manner of information is needed, organised, and disseminated, the activities people pursue there are further influenced by other important factors. These include their six distinctive qualities of these pursuits, as well as their rewards and costs and conditions of uncontrollability and marginality. Project-based leisure, which in general is also substantially dependent on information, generates its own set of rewards, while uniquely offering participants a powerfully interesting activity of limited duration. And our non-work obligations give rise to attitudes that stand apart from the realm of information, including the distaste we have for the core activities themselves, their unwanted tendency to eat away at positive lifestyle, and the inconvenience of such demands.

In sum, to explain more fully the complex leisure activities, we must also explore the socio-cultural and social psychological contexts

in which they are pursued. The 'other important factors' mentioned in the preceding paragraph make up major parts of these two contexts. To know, for instance, how information in a certain type of leisure is disseminated as reading material or how an emotion like fear or respect gained from that material can influence the choice of a particular sport are important questions. But answering them still falls far short of being a full explanation of becoming, say, an amateur hockey player or hobbyist white-water kayaker. These enthusiasts willingly court physical risk in their two activities, where venerated practitioners capable of extraordinary feats loom large.

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