Towards Positive Information Science

Jenna K Hartel
Jarkko Kari
Robert Stebbins
Marcia Bates

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Panel Proposal for the ASIS&T 2009 Annual Meeting
“Towards Positive Information Science”
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PARTICIPANTS
Marcia J. Bates, Ph.D., Department of Information Studies, UCLA, USA
Jenna Hartel, Ph.D., Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Canada
Jarkko Kari, Ph.D., Department of Information Studies and Interactive Media, University of Tampere, Finland
Robert A. Stebbins, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT
This panel offers a refreshing counterpoint to the predominantly problem-oriented perspective of theory and research in information science. Drawing inspiration from the fields of positive psychology and sociology, we propose the idea of a positive information science. This line of inquiry focuses on the positive qualities of information systems and the positive characteristics and habits of information users, as well as on the positive contexts of or factors in information phenomena. Insights into positive information phenomena provide a benchmark and target for improving information environments. The positive perspective also reflects a new generation of information-users who harbor an upbeat sensibility concerning the tools and practices of the Information Age. The panel makes its case by 1) offering an interdisciplinary comparison to positive social sciences, 2) reporting results from two positively-oriented investigations of information use in gourmet cooking and spirituality, and 3) viewing the idea in the context of the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science (Bates & Maack, forthcoming), an important benchmark and rubric of the field. To encourage a dynamic session, panelists and audience will see a list of positive features compiled and displayed in real time, serving as a basis for lively discussion.

BACKGROUND
The field of information science (IS), and particularly studies of information seeking and use, has often taken a negative view of the information experience. Information seeking has been characterized as stemming from a state of deficiency or a problem (Ross, 1999, p. 784). Another common approach for information seeking research is to focus on barriers to information access, as exemplified by Chatman’s (1996) pioneering studies of single mothers, janitors and an aging population. Such research orients to the ways information systems and their users fall short of a perceived norm—rather than revealing how they succeed in enhancing life. We believe information science currently lacks, and would benefit from, a thorough understanding of the characteristics of flourishing information environments and their users.

The idea of a positive information science follows the lead of other social sciences. For most of the past century, psychology has focused its research and attention on problematic mental states and processes. In response, a movement toward a positive psychology emerged in the past 20 years as “the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive” (Positive …, 2007). Research in positive psychology concerns positive emotions, traits, and institutions and explores such concepts as happiness, virtue, love, courage, creativity, justice, and tolerance. Positive sociology looks into how, why, and when people pursue those things in life that they desire, and the things they do to make their existence attractive and worth living (Stebbins, 2009). However, it must be pointed out that psychology, sociology, and information science also do a lot of ‘neutral’ work which relates to neither positivity nor negativity. The positive in the social sciences stands in counterpoint only to the negative there, while the neutral is not really a part of the debate.

A positive approach to IS is especially relevant in the changing culture of the Information Age. A next generation of information users has come to know information phenomena such as the Internet and social computing as fun and friendly resources for enhancing all aspects of life, from relationships to leisure. People are looking for the pleasurable and the profound like never before. The time is right for information scholarship to evolve in a positive direction.

Our panel aims to introduce the key elements of a positive information science and consider its place in the discipline today. To start, sociologist Robert A. Stebbins will present the history and logic behind the positive trend in the social
sciences. Next, Drs. Kari and Hartel will outline the main features of a positive research program and offer two case studies that characterize the positive information experience in the diverse settings of gourmet cooking and spirituality. To close, Dr. Bates, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, will discuss how the negative-positive axis is addressed in this landmark treatise on the field. As a dynamic way to crystallize the ideas from the session, a running list of positive features will be compiled in real time and projected before the audience. At the conclusion, audience members can add to the list based upon their observations or experiences; there will be ample time for questions and discussion.

**THE PANELISTS AND THEIR PRESENTATIONS**

**Introduction: The Positive Social Sciences**
Robert A. Stebbins received his Ph.D. in sociology in 1964 from the University of Minnesota, and today is Faculty Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Calgary, Canada. He is a leading teacher, writer, and theorist of leisure, and author of 31 monographs and more than 200 articles about leisure. His (Stebbins, 2009) *Personal Decisions in the Public Square* lays the foundation for a positive sociology. Dr. Stebbins will provide a succinct history and overview of positive trends in the social sciences.

**What is a Positive Information Science?**
Drawing from their paper, “Information and higher things in life: Addressing the pleasurable and the profound in information science” (2007), Drs. Jarkko Kari and Jenna Hartel will first identify a negative bias in information science. They will then present a positive approach to information phenomena, and discuss what this implies for information science.

**Case Study 1: The Hobby of Gourmet Cooking**
Jenna Hartel received a Doctorate of Philosophy in information studies from UCLA in 2007 and is an Assistant Professor on the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto, Canada. Her research focuses on information in everyday life and leisure realms and her dissertation was an ethnography of information in the hobby of gourmet cooking. Dr. Hartel will draw from her dissertation field data to challenge the “principle of least effort”—and reveal gourmet cooks as persistent, exuberant, effective information seekers.

**Case Study 2: Spirituality**
Jarkko Kari is currently an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Information Studies and Interactive Media, University of Tampere, Finland. He has published articles and delivered conference papers on information seeking related to the paranormal, on Web searching for personal development, as well as on information and the spiritual. Kari will talk about positivity related to spiritual information (messages reportedly provided or received by extraphysical means), especially its uses and effects.

**The Negative-Positive Axis in the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science [Working Title]**
Marcia J. Bates has a distinguished career as a teacher, researcher and theorist of information science. Currently she is Professor Emerita in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. As editor of the new *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, Dr. Bates is behind a broad reconceptualization of information science as a constellation of integrated specialties; she will discuss how the negative-positive axis is addressed in this landmark treatise on the field.
REFERENCES


