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SYSTEM OF SOCIAL INFORMATION IN THE PRACTICE
OF SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY

A modern organization of society is a complex dynamic system. Variety of components of this system care for its superior quality as well as protection of its functioning and development of a proper information. A great number of publications dealing with information seem to prove that the field is rich in experience. However, numerous publications and discussions point out to an urgent need for the research on the essence, characteristics and the role of information. Many experts in the field speak of the need for the creation of social information, and this aspect of information is the subject of the present paper.

The concept "social" has many meanings. This refers also to social information. Therefore, when using the term "social information" I understand that:

1. society is its generating source and the environment of its circulation;
2. it refers to a given community, reflects its life, events, phenomena, processes; it belongs to this community and forms part and parcel of the communal life;
3. it is actually useful to the society; it fulfills its needs and interests; it takes into consideration the aspirations and interests by providing information about the actual situation of members of a given community in a given geographical space.

The research on social information concerns mainly the definition of the scope and aim of social information. However, there are also some requirements: it should be rich in content and it should develop in accordance with methodology of science and theory of social development, while logical and mathematical theories of information and cybernetics should provide merely auxiliary concepts. The present research in the field of information has not provided a final solution of the problem.

The differences in approaches to the definition of social information pertain to the content of social information, its characteristics, its relation to philosophical categories, and its role in the life and development of society.

The question of the definition of social information *per se* is of utmost importance. In the present state of affairs the definition which seems to be the most compatible with the aim of social information is that proposed by Afanasyev (1978): "Information consists of this portion of knowledge which is used for orientation, activity, control and improvement and development of a system." It follows from the above that not every piece of news or message is information, but only these which are applicable for the purposes of directing and influencing the environment.

In accordance with the assumption stated at the beginning, social information applies—first of all—to human relations, interaction, needs and interests; it covers: news, documents, information about social forms of activity and other phenomena which may be included within the sphere of social life. Information processes are determined by the system of social relations. Thus, social information reflects class and national relations among the group of people who use it.

Social information, like any other kind of information, has its own classification based on characteristic features distinguishing it from the others. There exist various types of classification of social information: based on the nature of its source, means of preservation, medium of its transmission or the nature of its application. Since we are dealing with social information for the purposes of social geography it seems that the most appropriate type of classification would be the more general type reflecting its essential character i.e.:

- (a) direct orientation information,
- (b) social process information,
- (c) information about information—perception, efficiency and theory of social information.

This kind of classification has great methodological and practical merits, without depreciating the merits of other classifications, since every classification should be compatible with the aims for which it was conceived. In this case the proposed classification of social information should correspond to the definition of social geography (which I define as relations between society, its institutions and geographical environment, Otok 1987) and it should be conducive to the definition of the role of this information in the process of social development.

The purpose of direct orientation information is to facilitate every day decision-making. Social process information is based on research

which may be useful for basic social changes. This information comes from documentation, scholarly publications and special studies. Social process information serves the development of production, the improvement of professional and cultural level of population as well as helps to give direction to activities which are external to production and are related to the conditions and culture of living. It also provides informational support to scholarly and technological progress.

Information about information is of importance to the progress of theoretical research in the field of social information, its efficiency in theory and practice. This information is included in general methodology of science, theories of social development, statistical publications as well as in publications on theory of information.

The sources of social information play a very important role in its formulation. The most common source of information in terms of its object is society and processes that go on in this society. This source may consist of the whole society or its part—thus, of a territorial unit or a region, since the society functions on a certain territory. It may also consist of various phenomena, facts, events, processes of social nature. Therefore social research is an important source of social information. Among many and various methods in social research the most frequent are questionnaire and public opinion polls. The frequency of questionnaire testing is indicative of the importance of the public opinion. The value of these questionnaires is variable especially since the testing itself becomes a means of shaping of the public opinion. Public opinion polls are one of the elements of the mechanism of consciousness guidance whose importance has been considerably increasing.

Public opinion reflects the approach of various social groups to events and phenomena of social life. It is a group judgment expressive of the assessment of definite facts. Contact with public opinion and the procedures aimed at a communal support have been increasingly becoming the target of social organizations realizing definite programmes, i.e. environmental policy.

An important source of direct and reliable information is the direct contact with people, taking into consideration their suggestions and opinion on actual and proposed problems, i.e. the so-called social participation. Sometimes the information comes from letters addressed to social and political organizations or editorial boards of mass media. The letters contain critical remarks, analysis of errors, suggestions for more efficient economic and cultural activities. These letters may also render the attitudes and desires of individuals, the social and psychological climate of a group or community, people's reaction to political and economic decisions. They constitute an important source of informa-

tion indicative of human condition, success or failure of some actions, social involvement in the realization of some tasks in a given region. The importance of letters as a source of social information was stressed by F. Znaniecki and W. Thomas (1976). Individual letters usually deal with a single fact or an individual fate. Grouping these letters together according to problems enables one to establish certain tendencies common to many individual phenomena.

Research into social processes in general and especially into regional development requires the availability of information coming from statistical publications. Social processes consist of a multitude of interacting factors. The aim of statistics is to show the place and role of each of the individual factors in the overall process, to show the cause-effect relationship. The statistical publications, in spite of all their richness, place the main stress on national and international economic statistics. The questions of mass phenomena in the sphere of social relations, of spiritual and material life, the quality of life are treated only marginally. On the basis of present statistical data it is not always possible to answer the question: to what extent the economic changes are reflected in social life, how they affect relations among social groups, in what way they change human behaviour and lives, ways of thinking etc. In spite of their general character, all these phenomena have their specific regional colouring. And it is not only the problem of current statistical data, their comparability in time and space, but also the question of the bank of ordered and continuously updated information on the actual social and economic situation in various regions.

This increase of interest in information on the regional level makes many scholars inclined to look for new ways and principles of, among others, gathering, organizing and functioning of regional information.

These are proposals, basically, for the use of decision-making services and not for general distribution and they involve:

- supply of information for local administration and political authorities,
- coordination, gathering and distribution of regional information by libraries and information centres,
- coordination of the development of informational activities among various regional institutions and units of lower level, which deal with gathering information,
- information as regards information network.

Undoubtedly, the above have also contributed to the establishment of monitoring and geographic information systems as attempts to meet the demand for social information. Monitoring indicates changes in the state of the examined object or in the speed of the examined process.

In Etzioni's model of social activity (1968) social management capacity is seen as a control shaping function and as an action consensus. The efficiency of the control and the authenticity of the consensus depend on the precision of information, the balance between production and processing of information, and the autonomy of the information gathering. Since market itself is incapable of assessing non-market values, different means of evaluation have to be applied. The accepted non-monetary values which permit the measuring of the costs and profits in natural units (i.e. as level of health, level of education, ecological devastation) are called social indices and they play an important role in monitoring research.

According to W. Zapf (1983) the following monitoring methods of gathering information are most promising:

1. records of social trends including information about health, education, housing and income of families;
2. standardized research consisting in systematic statistical sampling as regards attitudes, aspirations and satisfaction of population according to established standards;
3. quality of life testing through direct interviews with average people, covering satisfaction, desires and hopes in various spheres of social relations;
4. public auditing (performed by public organizations) of various corporations—their profits, losses, new investments and results;
5. models of social simulation based on econometrics;
6. reports on future aimed at the evaluation of future social development, search for tendencies and forecasts, proposals of future alternative solutions related to present decisions and investments;
7. international comparative studies of structures and achievements of countries applying qualitative and quantitative information.

A well-conducted social monitoring makes it possible to diagnose the point of collapse of a given model of management at a fairly early stage.

Geographic information systems (GIS) aim at securing necessary and adequate conditions of production due to reliable and organized information on regional level. The basic condition for GIS content basis is the creation and implementation of dynamic information and administrative model of natural and economic system. The proposed GIS structure contains: file blocks, information processing and storing, transfer to receiver. The basic principle of the functioning of the system consists of ordering of base information storage and its modern efficient updating. Moreover, this principle should take into consideration processing and analysis of operational data. Grouping of natural and economic problems and the creation of output information for the user is secured

in this GIS structure by means of construction of dynamic operational models. These models (in cartographic form) and their comparative analysis allow for the dynamic characteristics of units under management (see Vorobieva 1988).

Fig. 1 provides a graphic rendition of the GIS. The system is geographic and its pattern may be applied to any problem which is spatially studied, including social processes.

The use of GIS in research is instrumental in assessment of situation, cause-effect analysis of existing relations and forecasting of future situations. The operational simplicity of the GIS in research, diagnosing and planning favours its general applicability. Therefore it fulfills one of the principal social postulates of universal use and general availability of information.

The improvement of information on theoretical as well as political level is an important variable of active policy. Information is a specific good capable of energizing other actions. However, if it arrives too late, simultaneously with the crisis, then the accrued problems themselves become information and the nature of information is wasted. There is a need for institutions which would guarantee a regular control of social conditions—a control which would be conducted systematically and independently. Since information is a pre-condition for political leadership therefore “the manager” may always be considered from the perspective of social control. The above principle applies to all levels. Apart

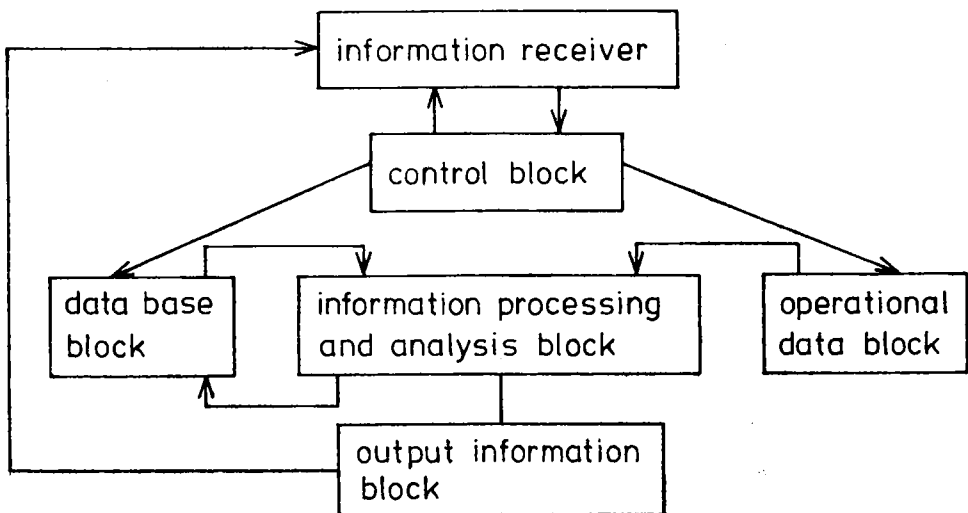


Fig. 1. GIS graphic model

from these goods, citizens demand information from the authorities and the authorities demand information from the citizens. The same applies to the relations between citizens and non-governmental organizations. Social control is a model of management performed by means of information. The value of information is measured by the results we achieve with its help. Only this information is valuable and useful which turns out to be new and indispensable to its user—then, as such, it plays an important and unquestionable role in the process of social or economic development on national and regional level and is the target of social geography.

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