

Community Information Needs of the Urban Population in Israel

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The community information needs of the urban Israeli population were studied using a telephone survey of 304 residents of a medium-sized city in central Israel and interviews with community officials in the city's social system. The purpose of the study was to identify the information needs of the urban community and its preferences, in order to establish the first formal public library's information centre in Israel. Approximately 60% of the problems cited by the subjects are concentrated in five categories: neighbourhood matters; studies; transportation; government matters; and entertainment, leisure and recreation. In most of the categories the percentage of local topics exceeds the percentage of general topics (i.e. topics not necessarily related to the community where the subjects live). Of all the problems (1,067) raised by the subjects, the percentage consulting dedicated information sources was 41.2%, and the percentage consulting general

information sources was 29.6%. The findings of the survey show that the subjects clearly prefer information channels that offer personal contact (e.g. by telephone or face-to-face meeting with professionals). In contrast to the findings of many other studies, informal personal contacts (e.g. family members, friends) was ranked last place. In the interviews, community officials admitted that they receive numerous requests for information or assistance in solving problems on a wide range of topics that are not in their sphere of activity. The analysis of the data from both methods indicated a lack of sufficient and accessible information sources and underscored the importance of public libraries as major community information centres. Following the results of this study, the first official community information centre in Israel is currently being established by the librarians at the public library in the city where the data were collected.

Introduction

People need accessible information in order to solve problems in their everyday lives. This information provides them with a sense of security, achievement and control. The digital age has opened the door for the interweaving of technology, information and human needs that will improve the quality of life of individuals as well as their ability to function as citizens in a democratic society. This is why community information should be viewed not only as a way to improve the quality of life of the individual, but also as a primary social concern (Baruchson-Arbib 1996; Wilson 1981).

Definitions of the term *community information* as presented in the literature refer either to the

range of subjects that can be considered under the title *community information* or to the impact that information has on the individual or on the community, and in some cases the meaning combines these two elements. In their definition of *community information*, Durrance & Pettigrew (2001, 9) include all the information that "helps people cope with problems of daily living and facilitates community participation by bringing people and organizations together." This definition refers mainly to information about human services, leisure activities, and government information. The current study relates to the everyday information needs of the urban Israeli population.

Although provision of community information is perceived as one of the public library's jobs by international and Israeli entities (Israel 1975; Sho-

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ham 1995), and despite the fact that researchers and Israeli professionals in the field attach great importance to provision of community information via public libraries in Israel as well (e.g. Stanchio 1979), community information services are still not available in a format similar to the one commonly used abroad, either at or outside public libraries. Nevertheless, several libraries offer users certain (non-inclusive) community information without formally referring to it as a "community information service" and without setting up the necessary database for this purpose. For example, some libraries have a classified guide to the businesses operating in the city, and others offer a "Useful Information" link to governmental and public sites or local bulletin boards (Baruchson-Arbib 2002). These services have several characteristics:

- The libraries generally do not provide the community information itself, but rather the links to the information contained on other sites;
- Even when the information itself is provided, there is no proper database that contains information on a range of topics;
- The service is not defined as "community information" and is not presented as a main service provided by the library;
- Most of the information is offered only via the website.

In Israel, the void resulting from the lack of a single entity in charge of meeting the range of community information needs among the population is filled by various private, public and voluntary organizations, each of which provides information on a specific topic. The most prominent of these organizations is the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB or SHIL), which is operated by the Ministry of Labor and Welfare and the local authorities. CAB provides information on citizens' rights and obligations through about 75 centres operating in 45 towns in Israel, as well as through a website containing a great deal of information. Today the government has a portal that provides information on its services and contains various forms required by citizens in their dealings with the establishment. This endeavour is part of the concept known as "accessible government."

In recent years, with the development of the Internet in Israel, we have seen the emergence of websites belonging to local authorities. Some of

them constitute early attempts at providing community information, and this seems to be the main channel under current development. In addition, public/private organizations and self-help groups provide information on various topics to the specific populations they serve: new immigrants, women, disabled individuals, and the like. However, there is no service that provides comprehensive information to the average citizen. This creates a window of opportunity for public library to act as an information centre.

The purpose of the present study is to identify the community information needs of Israeli urban communities as a basis for establishment of the first formal public library's community information centre in Israel. Because thus far no needs-survey on the topic of community information in Israel has been conducted, this research is a probe study, aimed at gaining a general familiarization with a phenomenon in order to formulate problems or hypotheses for additional studies.

Literature review

In the 1970s and early 1980s, a series of comprehensive surveys were conducted in an attempt to assess non-work information needs and seeking (Savolainen 1995). Savolainen sees information-seeking as a natural component of everyday practices. According to Savolainen:

The concept of Everyday Life Information Seeking (LELIS) refers to the acquisition of various informational elements which people employ to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems not directly connected with the performance of occupational tasks. Such problems may be associated with various areas of everyday life, for example, consumption and health care. (1995, 266–267)

Dervin (1976) maps the research area dealing with the population's daily information needs. She suggests that the information system in which the citizen operates comprises four components and the relationships created between them. The components consist of the individual citizen, his or her information needs, the existing information sources, and the solutions for meeting the information needs. Among these four components there is a system of connections, each of which gives rise to various research questions. The conclusions of her study indicate a need for an alternative mindset regarding information needs, as well as a new

research method that will be compatible with this new mindset.

Beginning in the 1970s, a group of researchers headed by Dervin began developing an approach known as the Sense-Making Approach. The approach included a system of conceptual and theoretical assumptions and a system of methodologies based on these assumptions, which helped make it possible to assess how people make sense of their worlds and how they use information and other resources in the process (Dervin and Nilan 1986). The approach is based on the needs people have to create meaning in constantly changing situations. The need for information is created when people lose the inner meaning of the situation they are in and have to give this situation a new meaning. The approach speaks of a three-stage model: Situation-Gap-Use: people stop in a *situation* where there is a *gap* (a question or a number of questions) that does not permit them to function. In such a situation people can make some *use* of any "bridge" that will enable them to overcome the gap.

The origins of the sense making studies perception are rooted in the Everyday Citizen Information Needs studies. The first study of this type was conducted by Warner, Murray, & Palmer (1973) among an urban population. The findings from this study revealed that information-seekers who had greater success at solving their problems than others made more use of general information sources and personal contacts, and also used more magazines as a problem-solving information source. Dervin (1984) examined the information needs of California residents. It involved 1,040 interviewees aged 12 and older. Its findings indicate that there are many information needs and that a significant number of them are not being met. It also found that well-off societies are differentiated from poor ones in terms of the situations they have to deal with and the way in which they give meaning to these situations. The conclusion of the study is that libraries and information systems must focus more on the human dimensions of information use and less on demographics as a means of organizing their services and getting to know their customers, emphasizing the creation of systems that respond positively to sense making. Another conclusion is that information needs depend on a specific situation and time. Therefore, needs must be evaluated in an ongoing manner.

In the Shetland Islands, the Shetland Islands Citizens Advice Bureau (SICAB) initiated a study that indirectly examined the information needs of the rural population. The research method involved interviews with 50 key people in various occupations within the community. One of the subjects that came up in the survey relates to the problem of confidentiality and gossip among small communities. Interviewees related to this problem as a factor that prevents people who need help from contacting the CAB. Another difficulty stems from the fact that some people regard asking for help as an admittance of weakness, an error or a flaw. The main topics that cause them to seek help are: how to find specific information/service/merchandise, pensions/annuities, housing, legal matters, problems related to interpersonal relations, employment, community-based care, education, health, public services, consumerism and miscellaneous topics (Beer, Marcella & Baxter 1998).

One of the problems that arose in the studies dealing with the daily information needs of the population is categorization of the needs. Lacking a uniform list of categories, each researcher developed his/her own categories. This prevented a comparison of the results attained in the various studies (Dervin 1976). The first serious attempt at developing a schema for coding daily information needs was made by Warner, Murray, and Palmer (1973). The schema was developed following a study in which 1,000 people were asked about their information needs. This study was followed by two other studies conducted by Dervin (1973) and Zweizig (1973), who asked general-population adults if they had recently had to deal with problems they could only solve by means of information or assistance. Those who responded positively were asked to describe these problems. The answers obtained in both studies were categorized into 19 main topics, which were divided into 154 subtopics (Dervin 1976). Their category list was also applied in a content analysis of a problem-solving column in two daily newspapers. Once it was found suitable for these needs as well, the list was established as a universal schema which is applicable to other studies dealing with the daily information needs of the population. This schema served as the basis for the present study.

A study conducted among low-income communities in Illinois raised the following required information topics: Community services and ac-

tivities (e.g. legal and city services, leisure and local activities); resources for children; healthcare; education; employment; crime and safety; and general reference tools (Bishop *et al.* 1999). Findings from the study conducted in the Shetland Islands revealed that the main spheres in which the interviewees (community jobholders) encountered difficulties in giving answers were (in order): welfare and social services, housing, legal issues, land laws, conflicts between neighbours and access problems, financial matters. Some of the interviewees said they had a problem when citizens request advice and are not satisfied with information only. Sex-related matters were also mentioned as particularly problematic. The findings clearly reveal that the community jobholders who were interviewed indeed serve as sources of information and consultation within the rural community. They are contacted primarily at their workplaces during working hours. It is interesting to note, for comparison's sake, that a study conducted in Lerwick (the only city in Shetland) revealed that most of the contact was made via telephone and not in person (Beer *et al.* 1998).

Method

Due to the complexity of the study topic, as presented in the review of studies that have been conducted in the area of community information needs, we decided to use multiple methods to investigate the area.

The research questions

1. What are the areas with most of the problems that pre-occupy the population in day-to-day life?
2. To which information sources does the population turn in order to obtain information?
3. To what degree do the existing information sources meet the needs in the various areas?
4. What are the information channels through which the population prefers to obtain community information?

Population and sample

The study was conducted among an urban population in a medium-size city (94,000 residents, 29,000 households) located in central Israel. The city is characterized by high socio-economic and educational levels. Despite its relatively high-class

status, the city has a high degree of social heterogeneity and geographical distribution. The city has several neighbourhoods with diverse characteristics. It contains very strong populations as well as middle and lower-middle class populations, both veteran Israelis and new immigrants.

The study combines a telephone community survey of residents and interviews with community officials in the city. The telephone survey encompassed a representative sample that was systematically selected from the phone book. This sampling method made it possible to include residents who live in rented dwellings, an important component in rendering the sample truly representative. The method also encompassed cellular telephone numbers when no other number belonging to homeowners appeared, so that the study would represent the population that uses only cellular phones.

Taking into account the size of the population and the number of variables examined in the questionnaire, we decided to continue conducting the survey until we obtained 300 completed questionnaires. This number represents just over one percent of the households in the city.

In total, 304 people completed the questionnaire. Sixty-nine percent of them were females and the average age was 43.9 years old. Sixty-five percent were married. Thirty-five percent of the families have children under the age of 18. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were jobholders and 42% were non-workers or unemployed.

Another part of the data was collected by means of structured one-on-one interviews with nine people who hold various jobs in that city's social system: the manager of the municipality's information centre for immigrants; the director of the municipality's youth advancement unit; a municipal hotline (106) operator; a switchboard operator at city hall; a social worker in the municipal welfare system, the secretary at the city ombudsman's office, a staff member in the rehabilitation and disabilities department; a staff member in the immigrant absorption department; a nurse at a well baby clinic; and the director of the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Instruments

Since needs are subjective and exist only in a person's consciousness, they belong to the category

of phenomena that cannot be directly observed (Childers 1975; Freeman-Rohde 1986). Therefore, the instruments were designed to collect these data by asking people about problems they encountered in everyday life (Ellen 2003).

The research questionnaire

The study involved a structured questionnaire, which was conveyed by telephone. To collect data regarding problems the subjects encountered in their daily lives and how they solved these problems, open-ended questions worded as experiential questions were used. This was done to obtain the broadest, most diverse information possible, ensure that we received genuine answers, and decrease the number of biased responses. One of the obstacles we had to overcome was the difficulty the subjects exhibited when asked to conceptualize their daily problems in terms of information problems or information needs. Previous studies found that subjects who had difficulties in discussing information needs in general, without first pinpointing a specific problem, and found it hard to distinguish between the problem/question that had arisen and the need for information required to solve the problem, and did not always understand the question about information sources to which they turned (Warner, Murray & Palmer 1973).

Therefore, we decided to base our interviewing method on the sense-making approach and not to ask the subjects directly about information problems, but rather, wherever possible, to use experiential questions, in which interviewees are asked to describe something they experienced that has contributed to their personal experience. The information obtained in response to such an experiential question is, by nature, subjective information. Thus, for example, they were asked, "Can you recall situations in which you have needed information in your daily life?" Then the interviewer said, "Now I'd like you to briefly describe the questions you asked yourself, what you did, and whom you turned to for help in solving the problem."

Since it is known that subjects sometimes have difficulty recalling situations such as the ones we asked them, and it is also known that when asked open-ended questions, they tend to provide the most prominent answers, and we wanted as many

answers as possible, we added a question in which the subjects were guided toward categories we created on the basis of Dervin's (1976) categories. The set of categories was translated and adapted for Israeli society.

The 14 categories in this study are as follows: a matter related to a government ministry; learning something new; work-related matters; entertainment, leisure and recreation; childcare; a neighbourhood matter; transportation; consumerism, school; health matters; matters related to law, crime and violence; religious matters; moving house; and immigrant absorption.

One-on-one interviews

The idea to interview officials personally in the community as a tool for collecting information about the information needs of the subject population is based on a study conducted in the Shetland Islands in the 1990s. This study examined the information needs of the rural population indirectly by means of interviews with 50 key people in various occupations in the community (Beer, Marcella & Baxter 1998). A comprehensive study conducted in Britain between 1997 and 1999 revealed that the community, as an organization, as well as various organizations within the community, consumes as much community information as private individuals. (Leech 1999). This finding is an additional reason for our decision to use this study to examine also the needs of the officials in the community.

The one-on-one interviews were intended to be a secondary tool in this study and serve two purposes. The first purpose was to collect data on the information needs of the population, as reflected in the interviewees' ongoing work, in addition to the information that would be obtained via the research questionnaire. We postulated that a comparison of the indirect information (collected via the one-on-one interviews) with the direct information (collected via the research questionnaire) would increase our knowledge about the study topic.

The interviews were of the guided, focused type, which makes it possible to obtain personal responses, make optimal use of the time, and focus the reference in the important questions. The questions are "experiential questions" in which the interviewees are asked to describe an experience they underwent from their personal experience.

Table 1. Distribution of Subjects' Problems in Each Area

Ranking by frequency of problem	Area (category)	Subjects who encountered a problem in the area (Frequency)	Subjects who encountered a problem in the area (%) N=304	Problems in the area out of all the problems raised by the subjects (%) N=1,067
1	Neighbourhood matters	163	53.62	15.28
2	Studies	124	40.79	11.62
3	Transportation	120	39.47	11.25
4	Matters related to government ministry	109	35.86	10.22
5	Entertainment, leisure and recreation	92	30.26	8.62
6	Matters related to consumerism	71	23.36	6.65
7	Health matters	68	22.37	6.37
8	Work matters	67	22.04	6.28
9	Moving house	53	17.43	4.97
10	Legal matters, crime or violence	46	15.13	4.31
11	School	37	12.17	3.47
12	Immigrant absorption	35	11.51	3.28
13	Childcare	28	9.21	2.62
14	Religious matters	22	7.24	2.06
15	Other	32	10.53	3.00
Total		1,067		100

Procedure

In order to ensure equal representation in the sample, we accommodated the people who are away from home during the day by conducting the telephone interviews between 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. on weekdays and on Friday mornings. The person who answered the phone was the one who was asked the questions, unless s/he was not an adult, according to the interviewer's assessment. The shortest telephone interview was five minutes and the longest was half-hour. In the beginning of each session, the purpose of the study was presented to the respondents by the interviewer.

The one-on-one interviews were conducted face-to-face during work hours, according to written instructions, which detailed the topics related to the study purpose. The questions were presented to the interviewees in free wording, generally in the order in which they appeared on the instruction sheet. Due to the nature of the study topic, there were times when interviewees chose to return to the topic they had talked about earlier because they were reminded of details related to that topic.

The research data were collected during May and June 2002.

Findings

The findings of the telephone interviews

Areas in day-to-day life where most of the problems preoccupying the population are concentrated

Table 1 presents the frequency of the problems cited by the subject-residents in each of the categories. Approximately 60% of the problems cited by the subjects are concentrated in five categories: neighbourhood matters, studies, transportation, government matters, and entertainment, leisure and recreation. Over half of the subjects cited neighbourhood matters as a category including a significant portion of the problems involved in the management of the subjects' immediate day-to-day environment. Examples of problems mentioned: handling hazards and malfunctions, burst water pipes, lack of playgrounds or prolonged road construction.

Close to 41% cited learning as an issue regarding which they had encountered a problem. The problems raised included questions of where to

Table 2. Distribution of Main Information Sources Consulted

Information Sources	Incidence of referrals (Frequency)	Incidence of referrals (%)
Municipality / municipal hotline ²	153	18.35
Newspaper / Local newspaper ¹	136	16.31
Internet ¹	90	10.79
Relevant authority / government body / public body ²	74	8.87
Personal connections ¹	70	8.39
Mediator ¹	50	6.00
Information (transportation) ²	46	5.52
Phone book / Yellow pages / 144 directory information ¹	43	5.16
Police ²	34	4.08
Distributor / store / importer / manufacturer ²	32	3.84
Health fund / other healthcare professionals ²	26	3.12
Library ¹	17	2.04
Other sources	72	8.63
Total	834	

Note: ¹ General sources; ² Dedicated Sources

study a specific subject or profession, where it is preferable to study this subject, the cost of studies, professional retraining courses, studies on health and sports topics.

In each of the domains the topics on which the problems that were raised were concentrated were classified into the following subcategories: local topics, general topics (topics not necessarily related to the community where the subjects live) and undefined topics. An examination of the percentage of local topics and general topics in each of the categories shows that in most of the categories the percentage of local topics exceeds the percentage of general topics. Only in three categories: matters pertaining to government ministries, consumerism and work, does the percentage of general topics exceed the percentage of local topics.

Sources consulted by the population to obtain community information

The findings regarding the research question dealing with the sources consulted by the population were collected and processed from the answers provided when the subjects were asked to state

Table 3. Preferred Information Sources in the Main Categories

Domain name	Preference I	Preference II	Preference III
Neighbourhood matter	Municipality	----	----
Studies	Newspaper / local newspaper	Personal connections	Internet
Transportation	Information Relevant authority / government body / public body	Municipality	----
Government matter	Newspaper / local newspaper	Internet	Phone book / Golden Pages
Entertainment, leisure and recreation	Newspaper / local newspaper	Internet	Personal connections

Note: In the domains in which two information sources appear in the table, this is attributable to the frequency at which the following source was consulted and was significantly lower than that of the previous source.

“What you did and who helped you solve it” with regard to each problem. The answers, which were worded freely and recorded verbatim, underwent a process of analysis and processing that made it possible to reach a generalization regarding the information sources used by the population. Table 2 specifies the main information sources cited by the subjects.

All the information sources consulted by the population can be divided into two main types: general information sources – the kind that supply information in any domain, or in a wide range of domains, and dedicated information sources – that provide information in a specific domain.

Of all the problems raised by the subjects (1,067), the percentage of consulting dedicated information sources was 41.2%, and the percentage of those consulting general information sources was 29.6%. With regard to 31.9% of the problems, no information whatsoever was consulted, or else it was not clear which information source the subject consulted. Approximately one third of the subjects made it clear that they did not know where or whom to consult.

Table 3 shows the preferred information sources by the frequency at which they are consulted, with regard to the five main categories.

Most of the dedicated sources cited by the subjects as sources from which they obtained information do not engage exclusively in supplying

Table 4. Distribution of Problems that Were Not Solved in Each Area

Area (category)	Problems in the domain (Frequency)	Problems that were not solved (Frequency)	Problems that were not solved out of all the problems in the domain (%)	Ranking by the frequency of the problems that were not solved
Neighbourhood matters	163	30	18.40	9
Studies	124	18	22.50	7
Transportation	120	27	26.76	3
Matters related to government ministry	109	11	14.52	11
Entertainment, leisure and recreation	92	17	18.48	8
Matters related to consumerism	71	19	23.53	6
Health matters	68	16	30.43	2
Work matters	67	10	10.09	12
Moving house	53	4	14.93	10
Legal matters, crime or violence	46	14	32.14	1
School	37	9	25.71	4
Immigrant absorption	35	9	24.32	5
Childcare	28	9	7.55	14
Religious matters	22	2	9.09	13
Other	32	3	9.38	---
Total	1,067	198	18.56	

information, nor is this generally their principal function, and the information they supply pertains mainly to their sphere of activity. The dedicated information source with the highest frequency of referrals is the municipality. This figure is anticipated, in light of the fact that the frequency of problems in the "neighbourhood matters" category is the highest, and awareness of the municipality's responsibility for these topics is high.

Of the general information sources, the national and local press is the most widespread source of all the general information sources. Newspapers were ranked in first place in two of the categories – studies and entertainment, leisure and recreation. The Internet was ranked in second place in two categories – matters pertaining to government ministries and entertainment, leisure and recreation, and in third place in the studies category.

To what degree do the existing information sources meet the needs in the various domains?

The data on which the findings regarding this research question are based were processed from the answers provided by the subjects, who were asked

to state whether they had received an answer from the source they had consulted with regard to each problem. The distribution of problems that were not solved, between the categories, is outlined in Table 4.

The subjects reported that 18% of the problems that they had raised were not solved. An examination of the percentage of unsolved problems in each of the categories revealed that the domains where the percentage of unsolved problems was the highest (in descending frequency) were law, crime and violence; health; and transportation.

It is noteworthy that the subjects gave a clear and unequivocal response to the question of whether the problem was solved or not with regard to approximately 60% of the problems. Therefore the finding on this topic is necessarily more limited in terms of the ability to apply it to the general subject public.

The information channels through which the population prefers to receive community information

The data on which the findings regarding this research question are based were collected from

Table 5. Preferences Regarding Information Channels (N=304)

Degree of preference for the channel	1	2	3	4	5	Not ranked	Grade
	lower			higher			
By telephone	18	18	34	72	162	0	4.1
At the information centre during face-to-face conversation	49	23	49	62	121	0	3.6
By means of written materials	29	29	73	77	95	1	3.6
Via computer terminals to be placed at central locations in the city	64	42	69	48	80	1	3.1
Via the Internet	44	5	40	47	109	59	3.0

the responses to a question asking the subjects to rank their degree of preference for each of the information channels mentioned in the question. The preferred information channels were ranked by calculating a ranking grade that took into consideration both the ranking itself and the different weights that the different grades have. The ranking grade enables comparison of the grades that the ranked objects were given, despite the differences between them. Table 5 describes the preferences of the population with regard to the information channels.

The subjects' first preference is to obtain the information by telephone, with a score of 4.1 (out of 5). Two information channels were ranked in second place: a face-to-face conversation with a professional at the information centre and written material. Obtaining material from computer terminals to be placed at central locations in the city scored 3.1, and the Internet scored 3. Hence we can say that these two information channels were ranked in third place.

The absence of a ranking by a large number of subjects led to a significant drop in the score given to this information channel. However, when we examine the percentage of subjects who gave the Internet the highest scores on the scale (4 and 5), out of those subjects *who did rank it* (disregarding the subjects who chose not to rank it), in comparison with the other information channels, we obtain a very interesting figure. It turns out that 45% of those subjects who ranked the Internet gave it the score of 5 – the highest grade on the scale, and another 19% gave it the score of 4. This means that 64% of the subjects who ranked the Internet see it as a preferred information channel for obtaining community information.

The findings of the one-on-one interviews

The population's information needs, as revealed in the interviews with community officers

An analysis of the interviews confirmed our assumption that most of the interviewees do indeed receive numerous requests for information or assistance in solving problems on a wide range of topics that are not in their sphere of activity. In most cases, no connection between the problems referred to the interviewee and the interviewee's function can be found. However, in some cases there appears to be an indirect connection between them. For example, a nurse at a well baby clinic is asked about preschools or nannies, by virtue of being an "expert" in the domain of childcare.

Interesting findings regarding the population's information needs were obtained in the interview with the municipal hotline operator and the switchboard operator at city hall. It appears that most of the questions, asked by residents who do not know where to obtain information or who provides the service they need, were directed to these two jobholders. As stated, the questions cover an extremely wide range of areas, some of which pertain to the various municipal institutions and some that have no connection with city hall.

It is interesting to note that some of the subjects stated in response to questions in the research questionnaire that they customarily call the municipal hotline when any question arises, and some of them said that they receive assistance in solving the problems. One of the subjects related that she called the municipal hotline when she did not know how to contact her son, who was serving in the army at the time, and that she was assisted by the switchboard operator to her satisfaction.

Another noteworthy finding is that of the nine interviewees, six reported that they collect information that comes into their hands and that they believe they are likely to be asked about in the future.

During the interview, the interviewees were asked what they normally do when they do not know the answer to a question. According to one interviewee, he replies that he does not know the answer. Some of the other interviewees replied that in certain cases they generally recommend calling another person who might be of help. Six of the interviewees replied that when they lack the required information they try to obtain it and give it to the caller.

The following is a selection of the most significant responses:

»When there are questions that I don't know how to answer, I try to find out and answer.« [The municipal hotline operator]

»[...] I called to find out so I would know what to answer when I am asked questions like these.« [The municipal hotline operator]

»When I don't know the answer, I try to find out and get back to the caller with the answer.« [The secretary at the city ombudsman's office]

»I make a list of names for myself, for example, names of nannies that I have heard good things about, and then I fix people up.« [The well baby clinic nurse]

»[...] send me fliers [...] I keep them and give out the information when I am asked for it.« [Community centres]

Three interviewees stated that a large portion of the calls come from residents who have recently moved to the city. This phenomenon can be understood as confirmation of the fact that information about the community is not sufficiently available, and the new population in the city, which is not familiar with the informal information sources, suffers from these lack more than long-time residents.

Through the interviews we attempted to check which of the population's information needs arise during encounters between community members and the interviewees, and whether any similarity can be found between these needs and the needs as they were expressed in the responses to the research questionnaire.

When the problems raised by the interviewees were classified according to the categories in the

research questionnaire, it was found that problems were raised in 13 of the 14 categories in the questionnaire. Only in the category of immigrant absorption were no problems raised by the interviewees.

The nature of the problems raised was fundamentally similar to the problems raised by the subjects in response to the questions on the research questionnaire. However, there appear to be topics in the interviewees' reports that were hardly mentioned in the answers to the research questionnaire, such as child development problems, psychotherapy in the framework of the health services, mental »first aid,« support groups, marriage counselling and family counselling. The explanation of this phenomenon may be rooted in the difficulty on the subjects' part to report personal problems of this type in a telephone survey, as compared with their willingness to talk about them to officers they meet with face-to-face.

Another type of problem reported by the interviewees and not mentioned in the responses to the research questionnaire pertains to assistance in performing practical activities, such as writing letters or help in making contact by telephone to obtain information and/or solve problems, mainly on the part of the elderly who have difficulty dialling, or new immigrants whose command of the language is insufficient for that purpose.

It should be stated that the interviewees mentioned a number of topics on which, based on their experience, they felt information should be available to the public, although they did not always mention a specific problem pertaining to these topics. The topics mentioned in this context were information for foreign workers, information about information centres on specific topics such as women's health, disabled children, single-parent families, information in Russian and a database of nannies and babysitters.

The interviewees' information needs for doing their jobs

A content analysis of the interviews was performed according to the 14 categories of problems. The analysis reveals that the principal type of information needed by the community workers interviewed was information on subjects pertaining to government ministries, studies, work and health. It is interesting to note that some of the

information that the officials needed was identical to the information that the subjects responding to the research questionnaire needed.

Interviewees stated that during the course of their work they need information on the telephone numbers of government ministries, for example, as well as information about the rights and services provided by the Israeli counterpart of Social Security (National Insurance Institute of Israel). Some of them need information about vocational training and courses, informal educational settings, places of employment in the private and public markets, employment for young people during the school year and summer vacation, and other, similar information, plus information about apartments for rent by the month. As stated, they need this information for the population under their care.

Discussion

An analysis of the data collected in the study reveals that the information needs are numerous and diverse, and that in some cases it was difficult to obtain the needed information. This finding corresponds with the findings of studies conducted in other places around the world (see, for example Dervin 1984).

In each community, a substantial number of the problems faced by the population are consolidated in a small number of categories. These categories should be identified when a community information centre is being designed. They should also be given priority over other categories in which the incidence of the problems is lower. This finding is significant in that it is possible to pinpoint clearly spheres in which the incidence of the problems is significantly higher than in other spheres.

A study by Warner, Murray and Palmer (1973) revealed a similar phenomenon, but the spheres in which the incidence of problems is the highest only partially overlap with the findings of this study. The most prevalent issues encountered by the subjects in this study were a "neighbourhood matter" – the resident's daily environment, and "studies". The matter involving studies is apparently related to lifelong learning that characterizes life at this time, with no specific point at which the education acquisition process ends and a significant part of the leisure time is also devoted to studies and personal enrichment.

As previously mentioned, over half of the topics raised by the subjects are local topics related to the community itself and even within the categories themselves, the incidence of local problems generally exceeds general ones. It is worth emphasizing several points that relate to the population's information sources as well as to the information channels through which it prefers to obtain community information.

One of the most interesting findings revealed by the study is a clear preference for designated information sources over general information sources. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that when people clearly know the designated information source that will provide them with the information they need, they prefer contacting it directly. Only when a designated information source does not exist, or is unknown, does the person choose to contact a general information source.

Furthermore, it was found that the subjects clearly prefer the information channels offering personal contact between the information seeker and the entity providing the information. They cited telephone and face-to-face conversation (that is, verbal communication) with a professional as their preferred information sources. One possible explanation of these findings is the richness of the verbal communication channels (Daft & Lengel 1986); and the perception that official bodies are more authorized to provide information.

The press constitutes one of the most important sources of community information; for information on "studies" and "entertainment, leisure and recreation", it was ranked number one. It appears that one of the reasons why large portions of the population prefer the press as a source of community information is that 90.4% of the subjects read a daily newspaper at least once a week, which means that this is the most convenient and available information source for them.

Of the three information channels for which there is no interrelationship between the party providing the information and the recipient of that information (written material, computer terminals and the Internet), the preference appears to be determined according to the degree of convenience of the use of the information channel. The use of written material is immediate, and there is no need for prior knowledge or any technology in order to make it available.

Another topic that should be mentioned is the status of the Internet in terms of community information. Based on the findings one can say that although the Internet is not the most preferred information source, it remains a useful information source for many of the subjects, and they use it to search for information in a wider range of categories than they seek in newspapers, for example.

In the context of the Internet it should be emphasized that 59 (19.4%) of the subjects chose not to rank it. This figure is highly salient in light of the fact that with regard to all the other information channels combined, there were only two instances where the subjects did not rank an information channel. It can be assumed that the reason for the high percentage of avoidance with regard to ranking the Internet is that its use is not yet widespread among all strata of the population. It must be taken into account that, according to professional assessments, only 20% of Israeli citizens are Internet users at the time the study was conducted. According to the findings of this study, approximately 42% of the subjects reported that they do not use the Internet. In light of that fact, the importance of the Internet as a community information source will increase as the percentage of users increases.

An interesting point for comparing the results of our study and the results of other studies relates to the extent to which personal contacts are used as a source of community information. According to our findings, personal contacts rank fifth in terms of incidence of usage as a community information source. When these findings are compared with the findings of similar studies conducted abroad, it seems that the population examined in this study makes less use of personal contacts as a community information source than do the other study populations. Thus Warner, Murray and Palmer (1973), in a study conducted in Baltimore, found that the study population makes extensive use of informal interpersonal communication, in addition to media channels and institutional information sources.

It could possibly be said that the relatively limited use of information stemming from personal connections by the population of the city where the study was conducted is attributable to the fact that this population is characterized by a high socioeconomic level and a high level of education,

and therefore tends to use diverse information sources, including official information sources, and makes less use of information stemming from personal connections. A series of studies conducted among diverse populations in the United States in the 1970s, as reported by Dervin (1976), found that only the upper decile uses official information suppliers to obtain community information and those personal connections are the most widespread information source for searching for this information.

As for the community officers, they can definitely be seen as sort of voluntary miniature information centres stemming from the hardship of the members of the community, on the one hand, and the willingness of the role holders to aid in alleviating that hardship, to the best of their ability.

As there is no person whose job is to serve as municipal information coordinator, it is not surprising that the city's residents turned the city hall operator and the municipal hotline into information centres and contacted them when they encountered a problem related to the activity of city hall and the municipal institutions. It was less expected that these parties would be consulted on topics totally unrelated to city hall and the municipal institutions, such as recommendations about restaurants, house calls by doctors, train and bus schedules, questions about government ministries and institutions, telephone numbers of public institutions and private individuals, social clubs for singles and more.

It is possible that the many calls to the city hall switchboard and the municipal hotline on subjects unrelated to the functioning of city hall indicate the lack of a central person capable of providing all the information required by the population. Based on the fact that many calls are made to parties at city hall, one might perhaps be able to conclude that the population expects city hall to assume such a function.

The city hall switchboard operator related that she receives many calls of the following type: "I don't know whom to contact, perhaps you can help me." From this type of call it is possible to understand that the callers know that it is not the city hall switchboard operator's job to provide the information they need, but in the absence of any other person to call, they called the person they knew and the one they thought would be able to help them.

In this context it should be stated that since the interviews were conducted with a relatively small number of officials who do not constitute a representative sample of the community officials, the findings obtained are necessarily limited and conclusions cannot be drawn from them regarding the totality of information needs of the community, and of organizations within the community.

Conclusions

Given that the information necessary for finding solutions to local problems pertaining to the community and the services provided within it cannot be expected from general information sources, the community itself bears responsibility for meeting these needs. A community information centre, concentrating all local information in one place and placing it at the community's disposal, could be of great help in solving these problems with which the population is coping. This can be considered as a challenge for public libraries since no other local public authorities are dedicated to providing community information to citizens as one of their goals.

We have no information regarding whether 40% of the problems cited have been solved or not. On the assumption that out of those 40%, at least some of the problems have remained unsolved, it can be assumed that setting up a community information centre is a matter of importance. Such a centre would be able to meet needs that are not being met by means of the existing information sources.

An additional finding that should be taken into consideration in planning an information centre is the clear preference among the subjects for dedicated information sources. This preference might be explained by the fact that when people clearly know which dedicated information source can provide them with the information they need, they will prefer to consult that source directly, and only when there is no dedicated source will they choose to consult a general information source. If we adopt this explanation, we will have to position the community information centre as a One-Stop Centre, and inform the public that it can obtain everything it wants there. Nevertheless, at least at the initial stage, it might be worthwhile to position the information centre as mainly a source of community information, thereby increasing the

probability of potential consumers indeed requiring its services.

The decision regarding how the service is to be provided is one of the decisions that will have the greatest effect on the information centre to be established. The findings indicate a clear preference for obtaining community information services by telephone. Based on the understanding that the success of the information centre depends on the response and on the users' desires and preferences, it appears that in the initial stages, preference should be given to the provision of service via all or some of the preferred channels. Nevertheless, the future use of the Internet and additional technologies should be taken into account and prepared for.

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