

THE CONTEXT OF THE INFORMATION BEHAVIOR OF PRISON INMATES

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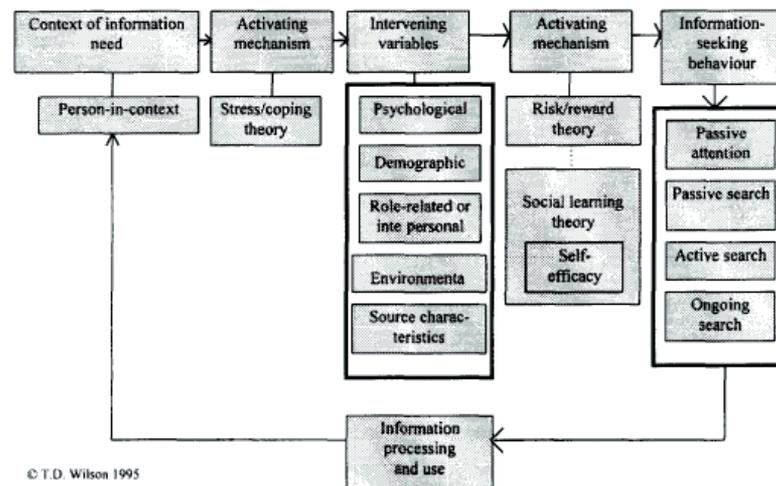
When we look at prison inmates we see people in a situation that is environmentally unusual and, simultaneously, very common in its occurrence, particularly in the United States. It is an enclosed world, high in stress, low in opportunities for decision-making, and socially isolating. We think of prisoners as different from ourselves. In reality, the chances continue to increase that we or one of our family might become prisoners at one time or another. In 2001, the rate of incarceration in the United States was 686 to 100,000 of population (Pastore and Maguire, 2003). We lead the world in incarceration of our citizens, the next closest is Russia with 635 per 100,000 (Motherjones.com, 2001). Whereas our national population has grown 20% in the last 20 years, the number of prisoners has doubled, and then doubled again (Beiser, 2001). The total number is 1,962,220 persons in state and federal prisons and local jails. These numbers do not include those on probation or parole, but do include those in prisons owned by private contractors. If we include probation or parole, the number jumps to approximately 6,594,000 (Pastore and Maguire). The population of this "small world" (Pendleton and Chatman, 1998) is staggering. What is the typical prisoner like? In 1997 92.8% of federal prisoners were male; 29.9% were white, non-Hispanic; 37.8% black; 27.3% Hispanic. In state prisons it was 93.7% male; 33.3% white, non-Hispanic; 46.5% black; 17% Hispanic. The discrepancy from 100% represents other groups, each less than 0.5%. The median age in federal prisons was 36, and 32 in state prisons (Pastore and Maguire). This diverse prison population has unique informational needs, and study of their information behavior will yield insight that can be broadly applied.

Information Behavior

In 1996, T. D. Wilson published "Information Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Perspective." In it he argued that information science is in reality only one of several disciplines that examine the information behavior of various groups. He surveyed a large quantity of psychological, sociological and communication studies and found many theories that illuminated his understanding of context, barriers and behaviors involved in information seeking. The outcome was a modified version of his original

model of information-seeking behavior incorporating much of what he found in the research of other disciplines. The general motivation for this survey arose from the fact that funding for empirical studies is never lavish (particularly when regarding marginal groups as in this case) and, by sharing data across disciplines, we can all increase our knowledge base. While uncommon, this should become the norm.

“Information behavior” as a term will be used here as well as “information seeking behavior” and the discussion will include motives for seeking information and motives for avoiding it among prisoners. The information studies field has not ignored the prison population, but very few articles found were user-focused and strictly observational. It was only by applying Wilson’s model of information behavior to the data from other disciplines that a clearer and deeper understanding of inmate information behavior became possible. I have organized this paper under the most relevant headings that correspond to Wilson’s model and I hope to begin to demonstrate how much we already know about inmates’ information behavior and what still needs to be studied.



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Fig. 5. A revised general model of information behaviour.

Illustration above from “Information Behaviour: An Interdisciplinary Perspective” by T. D. Wilson and Christina Walsh, *British Library Research and Innovation Report 10*, 1996. <http://www.informationr.net/tdw/publ/infbehav>.

Context of Information Need

What are the information needs of prisoners? Bluntly, they need to know how to survive and how they might get out. To survive they need to know who is trustworthy, what will make the prison society accept them and what rights to humane treatment they have. To get out they need to know the law and what they can do with their lives when free. There is a body of work that concerns itself with the legal rights of prisoners, and most articles that deal with prison libraries focus on access to information about the law and its application to individual inmates. This will be discussed in the section devoted to environmental intervening variables.

An excellent example of an information need was the focus of one of the few observational studies done of prisoners in the process of information seeking, "The Social Construction of Snitches" written by Malin Kerström in 1988. Kerström studied the efforts that inmates in a Swedish prison expend in trying to identify and punish informants. This is a concern not only because knowing will make their surroundings safer from betrayal but also the labeling serves a purpose of underlining the group dynamic. This particular study will be reviewed in several contexts because it shows various channels of information, the values of inside and outside sources and the construction of a group norm with this information.

Activating Mechanism and Stress/Coping Theory

The "activating mechanism" of information behavior can be understood as a consideration of motivation. Chatman discusses this in terms of situations that would cause an inmate to cross information boundaries, in other words, to be motivated to get information from outside the inner circle. She names three conditions that need to be met: 1) the information is critical; 2) it is relevant; and 3) the current situation is no longer functional (1999). Wilson illuminates this concept with a discussion of stress and coping theories. He uses Folkman's theory of psychology that defines stress as being a situation that exceeds a person's resources and endangers his wellbeing. Coping is defined as "cognitive and behavioural effects to master, reduce or tolerate the demands of...stressful situations." (1996, Chapter 2). He goes on to make a point of explaining that "endangering" could relate to something so minimal as to not even be related as stressful by the information seeker. Here, in a discussion of inmates, we see many instances where "endangering" is literally true. Two common coping mechanisms are: information seeking to reduce the uncertainty that is causing the stress, and information avoidance to try to escape the situation by denial. This corresponds to Chatman's observations of women inmates

who refuse to listen to information about life outside. They have learned that this information does not lead to decreased stress because knowing something does not mean that they can effect any changes outside the prison. Therefore a number of women inmates avoid knowledge of the outside entirely (1999).

In other situations, information can be used as a buffer to the stress of life inside. Mark Knudsen (2000), an inmate, describes how books and the worlds they represent have been a lifeline in his prison existence. "I do not think I would have been able to handle stressful situations if the library was not readily accessible to me," reports Knudsen. "It allows me to escape the on-going stress and monotony of being unable to see the outside world firsthand." Another kind of information, that detailing an aspect of the "inside" world, is the topic of informants or "snitches." That this type of information is very important to inmates is detailed by Kerström's review of the pertinent literature:

That the subject of informing is an important topic among criminals is evidenced in McCleery's (1960) claim that uncovering snitches is an obsession for the majority of inmates. Furthermore, Maguire (1982:76) writes in a study of burglars, "We were surprised at the prominence the subject [informing] seemed to take in discussion among thieves..." (p.165)

Finding out who is and who isn't a snitch would certainly be characterized as an "activating mechanism" by Wilson, and one more such mechanism is touched on briefly by Rebecca Dixen when she remarks that, "Another impact of the newer technologies is higher expectations among prison patrons. They know more information is available and they want more" (2001). We can see that a simple awareness of possibilities inherent in something like the internet can be enough to trigger information seeking.

Wilson extends his discussion of the seeking/avoidance continuum with an examination of some of the work done by researchers in the health disciplines. Health issues are areas where ordinary citizens confront information that holds the same relationship to life and death that prisoners feel with many of their information needs. A cancer patient and an inmate both need information to survive and yet both can experience information as increasing their distress rather than decreasing it. Wilson reviews several studies in health sciences to explore the question of why people in critical situations are as apt to avoid as to seek information. One of the clearest descriptions is from Miller and Mangan (1983) and their terms "monitoring" and "blunting." Monitors are people who need a great deal of information to be comfortable with a stressful situation and blunters are

people who are made more and more fearful by increases in information. This continuum is certainly apparent in prison life. We have seen it already in Chatman's 1999 study, "A Theory of Life in the Round," when she details when the inmates stay within and when they cross the barriers to outside information. Where an individual falls on the continuum might be influenced more by the social roles of prison society than the individual's original psychological preferences. We will explore this as we review some of the intervening variables that can create barriers in the information process.

Intervening Variables

Before beginning the discussion of intervening variables we should make clear that information behavior, like all human behavior, can frequently be understood using a model with seemingly linear steps. Life is rarely linear, however, and as Wilson points out, barriers can appear to prevent an individual from considering information seeking as a coping strategy; they can appear to prevent the success of information seeking; and they can appear to prevent the successful incorporation of that information into behavioral change (1996). Rather than reiterate these barriers at each step, we will use Wilson's model to discuss some of them.

Psychological

Some psychological barriers related to information behavior have been reviewed in terms of the question of monitoring and blunting. Lesta Burt reports several psychological studies of inmates that create a common profile of a prisoner as someone who is impulsive, over-reactive, fearful, manipulative, and unable to plan properly for the future. (Burt, 1977). Whatever the common psychology of a "criminal" (making the leap that most people sent to prison are guilty of a crime), certain behaviors are associated with incarceration itself. Lee Bowker explores this in his book *Prison Subcultures* (1977). He calls the famous experiment done at Stanford University with a pseudo-prison "one of the most significant prison studies of the last decade" (p. 64). This experiment involved students who were randomly assigned roles as guards and prisoners. They were extensively screened before-hand, and the setting was completely artificial. Nonetheless, the experiment originally scheduled for fourteen days was called off after only six because the students were exhibiting irrational behaviors. "Prisoners became passive and troubled; guards became authoritarian and sometimes even sadistic" (p. 64). If after only six days, a normal student consciously participating in an experiment becomes passive and troubled, we can safely infer that most prisoners would be

detrimentally affected by their incarceration. Luis Medina, an inmate in Wisconsin, reports “Inmates often lack interest, motivation, intellectual hunger, drives and desires to learn” (2000).

Demographic

What demographic variables apply to prisoners’ information seeking? One of the most predictive is educational level. Obviously, someone who is illiterate relies more on gathering information from personal contacts and television. These are not normally ways in which useful legal information is found. In 1989, the United States Supreme Court decided that these prisoners have the right to receive legal assistance from others, specifically self-taught fellow inmates. These paralegals can assist them in preparing legal documents. This has been resisted by most correctional facilities because they wished to be able to deny inmates’ access to other inmates, and because these self-taught legal assistants sometimes abused their power by charging for the help, thus creating discipline problems. The Court held in *Johnson v. Avery* that illiterate inmates could not be prevented from having access to legal help.

Another demographic issue is language. Spanish is the primary language of more and more inmates in the United States, yet most of the information available is in English. This is even true when the population is overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking. David Wilhemus has detailed some of the effects of various court rulings on legal information available to prisoners (1999a). He reports that the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico responded to a lawsuit about access to legal information by placing law libraries in the federal prisons. There was

a problem with the development of legal collections in that 90 percent of Puerto Rico’s prison population spoke only Spanish and that none of the federal reporters were printed in the offenders’ native language. This problem was not dealt with by either the correctional facilities or by the courts. (p. 15)

If an inmate has the psychological motivation to seek information, can read the language it’s in *and* can understand legal writing, what other barriers might he find? Before we discuss the very large category of environmental barriers, we will look at inter-personal and role-related variables.

Role-related or inter-personal

Relationships with others can skew information seeking behavior toward either sharing or isolation. Status within the group can play a part in access

and in credibility. Kerström recorded some interesting findings regarding the interaction of the guards and the inmates. Surprisingly, guards were considered reliable, trustworthy sources and Kerström posits that this was because communication between the two groups was restricted and that hints from the guards as to the informant status of another inmate were given reluctantly and very rarely. This makes all their information seem extracted rather than volunteered, and therefore more reliable. Chatman and Pendleton describe the withholding of information as a major reason that some guards are called “bitch guards” by women inmates.

For example, prisoners perceive these guards as showing extreme unwillingness to share information that could help them understand various rules. This information is important because understanding the rules can mean avoiding punishment, earning earlier release time, getting desirable work assignments and even wearing a certain color of uniform. (p.738)

The guards were believed to be using withholding of information to set up prisoners to fail and get punishment.

Where does the librarian’s role fall in this divide between the guards and the inmates? Lesta Burt reports “inmates usually think that the staff members are withholding information which they actually do not possess” (1977) and this corresponds with Chatman’s report that a prisoner thought that law books were removed because inmates were finding out that their sentences were unnecessarily harsh. When Chatman said they were removed because legal services were now provided, her explanation was discounted because the inmates felt she didn’t understand the way this access was restricted by the administration. Thus we see active malice being ascribed to various situations when it did not necessarily apply.

Wilhemus (1999b) describes the point of view of a prison administrator when he hires a librarian. “The loyalty factor is a critical area of concern. The administrator attempts to hire a qualified professional librarian who will without question follow the policies of the institution...” When prison library studies were conducted as part of a federal grant program, they revealed “the librarian in the institution was the most important element in determining the use that was made of the library” (Burt, 1977). This need for loyalty to the institution, the suspicion of the inmates, and the professional ethics as stated by the American Library Association in its Library Bill of Rights, all pose difficult choices for the prison librarian and illustrate the challenges inherent in their inter-personal relationship with the inmates.

Finally, the roles and status of individual inmates can restrict their information. In the example of conversation with guards, low-ranking inmates were considered more suspicious if they talked to guards than high-ranking inmates (Kerström, p.160). Chatman and Pendleton also report that low-ranking inmates, in this case “brides” (p. 740), can have their access to information from other inmates restricted. A “bride” is a young, vulnerable inmate that has been co-opted by a high-ranking inmate upon entry into the general prison population. Chatman and Pendleton observe,

The effect of assuming the role of bride on an inmate’s behavior is obvious. Useful information enters her world at the discretion of her “husband.” Other prisoners approach her and share tidbits with her because she is the bride of so-and-so. If she becomes the bride of a prisoner with some status, her information becomes that much richer. (p. 741)

Environmental

It would seem obvious that their environment is a primary concern of inmates since they are behind bars and the environment is extremely restricted, a condition detrimental to the success of information seeking behavior in every sense. The effects of environmental constraints have been studied widely in psychology and sociology, but for purposes here, we will consider how prison environments differ from each other, and change over time, rather than how they differ from the world outside. Prison environments are more or less harsh according to what the general society supposedly wants. The increase in “get tough” policies over the last decades has caused a corresponding drop in services for inmates — including library services. Vince Beiser of MotherJones.com says this is caused, not by crime, but by the “perception of crime and how that perception has been manipulated for political gain and financial profit” (2001).

This interest in punishment rather than rehabilitation has changed the focus on legal information for prisoners from ensuring access to making them prove that they have been materially harmed by inadequate access. *Bounds v. Smith* in 1977 mandated that prisons have law libraries and inmates have access to legal help. But, in 1996, the United States Supreme Court decided in *Lewis v. Casey* to make an attempt to restrict the number of “frivolous” lawsuits by demanding that inmates demonstrate that lack of access to legal information had made them suffer actual injuries. How they are to prove this without adequate access to legal information is not

a question that currently troubles the Supreme Court. This change in philosophy has far-reaching effects, and the economic ones are simple to state. More and more incarcerated people mean more and more prisons need to be built. With a reluctance to raise taxes and to seem weak on crime, politicians allocate fewer dollars per inmate. The majority of these dollars are spent on supervision, and the little left over for inmate services must include health care and educational programs.

An overriding concern with costs can affect information flows: a 2000 budget proposal for the State of Washington eliminated all of that state's prison law libraries stating that it would result in a \$596,000 a year savings by eliminating 8.8 full-time staff positions. The replacement would be the provision of court forms. Since *Lewis v. Casey*, no class action suit challenging systemic court access issues have been won (*Prison Legal News*, 2001), so relief from the situation will not be simple or quick: Arizona shut down 34 libraries; Idaho and Georgia gutted prison libraries of law books; and Florida proposed cutting 30 prison librarian positions (Sullivan, 2000). Even before *Lewis v. Casey*, South Carolina's governor changed its program in less than three weeks. "When *American Libraries* can laud an outstanding prison library program like South Carolina's (February/1995) and report on its demise just four months later (June, 1995), one might wonder whether the punitive sense among those in power has not supplanted their common sense" (Schneider, 1996). The governor wanted to "get tough with criminals" and as a consequence, the director of the prison library system was dismissed, seventeen inmates who worked as library trustees were sent back to their cells, and every book to be purchased now has to be reviewed by the state superintendent of education, the DOE's budget director, and the library system's advisory council which rejects books without divulging its reasoning (Chepesiuk, 1995). This cumbersome process restricts access to new books simply by existing.

Time is a limiting factor in information access. In prisons, this can mean time available for the inmate to pursue his own interests or the time a librarian has to spend with him. Inmates have varied amounts of free time depending on whether or not they have required jobs within the facility. Even more limiting is the amount of time the librarian has to spend with each inmate. "Face-to-face reference interviews tend to average only 5 or 10 minutes per inmate..." (Dixen, 2001) Some statistics from the Minnesota Law Library Service's 2001 annual report are of interest: requests processed increased by 26% between 1999 and 2001; on-site meetings with inmates increased 25%; and individuals assisted increased 17%. This was without an increase in paid staff, but with the addition of one part-time intern. The effect of this increase on quality of response is

not known. One other interesting fact from this report is that service to 20 Minnesota prisoners was provided despite their being housed out of state. Prisoners are frequently moved out of their original jurisdiction for economic reasons, depriving them of ready access to the appropriate and pertinent legal information. (*Law Library Services to Prisoners*, 2002)

Further evidence of the importance of time comes from the proposal placed before the Department of Corrections for the County of Santa Clara, California in January, 2003. In his recommendation to replace the jail law libraries with privately contracted legal research assistance, Jim Babcock, Chief of Correction, filed a report containing the following information:

Each pro per inmate [those who are indigent and qualify for public defense and whose access to the courts is in question] currently receives 2 hours, five days a week in the law library. Because there are more pro per inmates than there are hours in five days, inmates are scheduled in the library around the clock, seven days a week. (p. 4)

One of the most powerful environmental barriers to any independent behavior, whether information related or not is prison culture. A succinct description is in Lee Bowker's *Prison Subcultures* (1977).

This subculture is a pressure cooker from which there is little chance of escape except through psychological withdrawal. Its rigid system of social stratification permits little vertical mobility. Nearly all social relationships have an authoritarian quality. Equality between peers is threatening to prisoners, so peer situations are usually resolved into relationships in which one man is subordinate to the other. The possession and use of coercive power is the central value of the prisoner social system. (p. 35)

No one in this situation is free to make his or her own choices regarding information seeking, much less acting on information received. We will discuss further the aspect of group norms and information in further sections.

Source Characteristics

Wilson discusses access, channel, and credibility as source characteristics and illustrates his main points with an examination of consumer information (1996). As much of the consumer work is not strictly applicable, and we have already discussed access, we will use Kerström's study to look

at credibility in the prison world. Kerström describes four sources of information used in making the decision to label someone a snitch. First and foremost is personal communication. When inmates gather, they discuss who is and who isn't a snitch. Sometimes this general discussion is sufficient evidence to label someone a snitch. It is especially accepted when the person speaking is considered generally reliable, regardless of whether or not it is judged that person would have access to more proof in this case than anyone else. Kerström says that these inmates have "a greater definitional power" (p. 159) because they have proven themselves to be extraordinarily trustworthy. The example given is an inmate who in the past testified falsely to save other inmates from punishment, even though they had not sought his help, but just because he was loyal to the group (p. 159).

If the inmate has enough definitional power, this may be sufficient to label the person in question a snitch. If not, more information is sought. Previously we discussed the quality of guards' information for inmates, but just to reiterate briefly, guards are considered more reliable by Kerström's inmates because of their aloofness and unwillingness to talk with inmates generally. A third source of information is observation of privileges of the suspect inmate. If enough privileges are accrued without a reason that is clear to everyone, the explanation is that the suspect is a snitch. The final source is "the papers" (p. 162). Each Swedish inmate at the time of Kerström's study had a paper copy of his court documents with him in his cell. A suspect could be required to "show his papers" (p.163) and they would reveal if he got a change in sentence due to informing, or if police testified to his help in the case. This was considered the most reliable source, but the very act of asking to see someone's papers had an offensive implication. Most inmates would have to be fairly sure that they would find proof before they would ask to see the papers.

Risk/Reward Theory

Wilson uses consumer research to find a workable definition of risk in terms of information. He quotes Settle and Alreck (1996, Chapter 5) and their five components of risk: performance risk, financial risk, physical risk, social risk and ego risk. In their framework, performance refers to the product being researched by the consumer and the other risks are self-explanatory. In most consumer research, physical risk would not be a paramount concern. It would have a role in choosing something like an infant car seat, but that would be an exception. The other categories are the most often studied. However, in the case of prisoners, we see a group where physical danger is ever present, and the social risk of information seeking is also a physical risk. In the discussion of "brides" in Chatman

and Pendleton's research, low-ranking individuals like "brides" are not to attempt to get information on their own. What they need to know will be told to them by their "husbands," and if the "husband" is high-ranking enough, and has given her permission, information can flow back to the husband through the "bride" from other inmates (1998). Violations of any social code in prison results in violence, and as Kerström found with the investigation of snitches, merely talking too much to guards is considered a violation and suspicious behavior. If the inmate talks enough to the guards to be labeled a snitch, it goes without saying that the "snitch" is then in physical danger from the others.

This threat of violence leaves an inmate with the task of judging whether gaining information will be worth whatever risk would be attached to the attempt. Another threat makes the role of the librarian very difficult. The librarian functions best when there is trust with the user, but if a librarian is perceived to be part of the administration, then that trust cannot exist. "Many are afraid of repercussions if they request information on their rights or on some subject that might seem to be related to illegal activities" (Dixen, 2001). Personal financial risk would not seem to factor into the inmate's decisions, but in fact, those inmates that help others with legal information have been (against regulations) charging their fellow inmates for help. The currency was cigarettes and coffee, but it was "financial risk" nonetheless (Wilhemus, 1999a).

Social Learning Theory: Self-efficacy

Wilson discusses another social theory that is involved with activating mechanisms — self-efficacy. The definition he uses describes self-efficacy as a subset of predicting outcomes. Self-efficacy is the estimation a person has that a given behavior performed by himself will result in a given outcome. This can be in contrast to the general outcome he assigns to the behavior. To restate, an inmate could believe that higher education will lead to a good job while simultaneously believing that any education he could obtain himself would not result in employment. Much of the literature discussed mentions the passivity and powerlessness of many prisoners. Darrin Lawson did a study in 1996 measuring powerlessness, among other factors, and prisonization (defined as assimilation into prison culture). He found that the more powerless an inmate felt, the more he fit into the prison society. This was their cultural norm and has a profound effect on information seeking. Ironically, information seeking itself can result in a diminution of the feeling of powerlessness. Bowker found that "exposure to the legal service project has a positive effect on attitudes.... and participation in the legal aid program was associated with decreased

prisonization” (1977). Jean Clancy Botta, a law library coordinator in the State of New York, said, “people in institutions need the hope of freedom and justice that is promised by access to the courts in order to survive behind bars” (1990). Mere access to information can be enough to make a difference.

Information Processing and Use

Any legal information that an inmate can apply to his or her situation can mean relief from poor conditions if not from incarceration itself. Educational information could be used for job seeking upon release. The possibility of barriers arises again, this time preventing assimilation of information rather than gathering. We will not reiterate these, but will instead use (again) Kerström’s study as an example of the successful utilization of information gathered.

The snitch has to be identified through a search. The reason for doing this is a belief in upholding norms as ends in themselves (p.158). It is a common belief that a snitch will always be discovered and will get “what he deserves.”...The identity of “the informer” is thus both something obvious – everybody knows who he is – and at the same time a social construction (since almost everybody had snitched at some time). (p.157). Overt acceptance of a rumor may become a symbol of loyalty to the group....when a group finally has drawn a conclusion, there is a demand on everybody to agree to this interpretation. If someone still disagrees, group sanctions will be applied. (p. 164)

The information is useful — not simply to discover the snitch’s identity, but also to reinforce group norms. Establishing and defining these group norms is a major task of prison culture, so this information seeking behavior is valuable to the group in and of itself.

Conclusion

T.D. Wilson’s 1996 model of information behavior has some demonstrated utility in examining the information behavior of prisoners. By searching across disciplines, most of the nodes can be addressed with current and established information, thus illustrating that the information behavior of prison inmates can be determined while not necessarily using information studies per se (except in the case of Chatman and Pendleton). Kerström’s work, while concerning itself almost exclusively with information gathering, was found in sociological literature. The worth of these studies

will not be in understanding prisoners alone — though using Wilson’s interdisciplinary model reveals much about the equity of the terms and conditions of being a prisoner in 21st century America in more arenas than availability of information. Prisoners are perfect examples of people under extreme stress — another group aside from cancer patients illuminating what happens under such conditions. They are tracked after leaving prison, so any changes in behavior can be studied longterm. And, as long as America leads the world in incarceration rates, we will need to understand what incarceration does to humans, and the implications to society of these changed individuals. We need confirmation that access to information and making choices regarding it are transforming experiences unrelated to the successful integration of the information. Information professionals understand this, but policy makers generally do not. Analysis of coping strategies such as monitoring and blunting before and after incarceration could lead to better methods of communicating to those under extreme stress. Studies should be empirical rather than based on opinion as so much of the literature regarding prisons has been. Policy makers will no doubt continue to make decisions motivated primarily by political concerns, but empirical knowledge of the population and the consequences of changes would be harder to ignore.

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