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HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY AND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM AND PRACTICE MODIFICATIONS

Christina Vayas

Introduction

This draft paper

- a) Explores teaching Social Work students to understand and be prepared to take responsibility as professionals in the quickly evolving Information Society, coping with new dilemmas on human rights protection, adjusting old methods and developing new skills in service provision and delivery systems.
- b) It is suggesting, therefore, the *inextricable link of information technology use and expansion with goals of social justice and human well-being*. As the latter is the ultimate goals of social work practice, one can easily understand that Social Work curricula can no longer ignore coursework on the morphology and characteristics of the Information Society, on the values and ethical dilemmas inherent in the use of the New Technologies, or on the new kind of human relationships and new common human needs it develops.

- c) It pinpoints on some *social work alert issues* presented in our current times and proceeds with certain *suggestions on methods and skills* for the practitioner, who wishes to serve in the human rights field of practice.

The argumentation here goes beyond the development of the use of Information Technology (É.Ô.) in Social Work education; namely, the integration of computer assisted learning in social work courses and in networking, which has been introduced, early, in North American Schools and, in somewhat delayed paces, in the European schools of Social Work (Reindehl 1985, Rafferty et al 1995, Schoech 1990). Effort is made to question the nature of Social Work education in an “electronic” democracy, created by global information highways in the Cyberspace, claiming equality of access to data and breaking through time and space barriers!

As practicing social workers, we need a more complete understanding of the individual, living under powerful telematics progress; of the human and social rights at risk, of the influences on social institutions such as the family, employment, education, welfare and health. This eventual understanding could lead to a more effective social work practice and social service provision.

Learning how to use the computer and the Internet as a tool is important for the Social Work student and the practitioner, but it is one-sided and incomplete. The other side, should introduce ideas regarding integration in Social Work education of practices and methods in micro and macro areas, and in link with human rights protection in the Information Society. Social work educators should understand the new threats on social justice and quality of life for all people, in the age of virtual reality and Internet addiction and, in turn, incorporate this in the courseware.

Of course, the issue is not new and there has been concern about Social Work theory, values and skills in the Information Society by some gifted pioneers, who envisioned an active and vital role for social workers in the “electronic” age (D. Schoech, B. Glastonbury, W. Lamendola, W. Hudson).

Human rights protection has always been a risky and demanding field of practice. Adding to this the requirement of an extensive knowledge of Information and Communication technologies makes intervention even harder. This is why, I assume, schools of social Work have long resisted curriculum changes to include the interface of Social Work and the Information Superhighway for social justice protection.

It is time, we acknowledge the urgency to understand how social environment and individual character flaws are linked with technology and telematics progress, if we want to act and contribute effectively to the citizens and the communities of the Information Age.

I. Main areas of debate in the information society of concern to social work students/practitioners

- Scientific research is progressing from artificial intelligence to the area of artificial “conscience”.

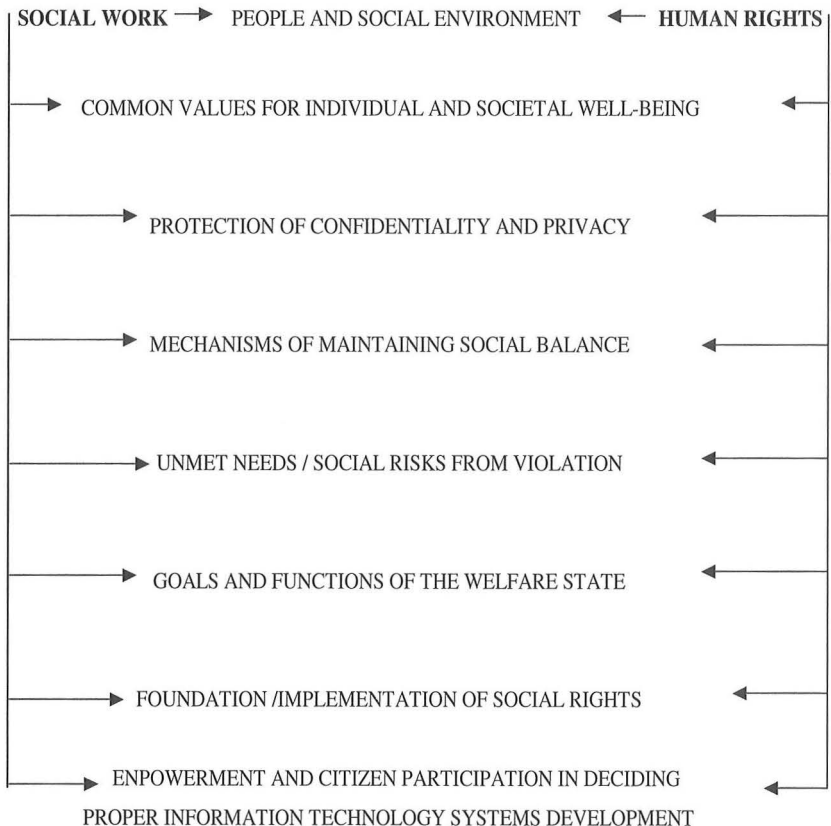
Does this imply a new risk by trying to “inplant” emotions, even “consciousness” into the computer ?

- Attempts of electronic control of citizen rights. “Electronic filing” directly abusing to personal freedom (A. Passeron 1970, p.25).
- How strong is the influence exercised by the individual subscribers in the Internet or any other electronic network system? Who is surfing in the city info highways? Who is this unseen Internet user entering our homes and becoming the consultant to our children?
- Quality and security issues and requirements at risk. Hackers break codes and make changes in data bases with unforeseen results on human rights violation. How about the undetected intrusions in open networks?
- “Discrete authority”, as exercised by public administrators or service providers, becomes incompatible with “programming software” for all decisions and actions regarding citizen/client service allocation (A. Marinos 1989). How can we afford to loose the former?
- As more telesystems develop to serve our needs, the limitation of personal human contact and the violation of confidentiality rights becomes greater.
- Legal and democratic use of information technology depends on the democratic committments of its programmers (A. Marinos 1989). Who controls the software programmers? Who protects the average citizen from these “guardians”?
- Fears of super-centralization and super-localization in power allocation and political decision making.
- Very often the sources of information are obscure or unknown. However, many individuals and groups are using or depend on such information.

Are the electronic networks reliable? Who can control the source or prevent information transmission and dissemination?

- More information does not secure more personal freedom or better knowledge. If the state or other political or economic organization has access to more information than the average citizen, there might be pressure on him/her in daily life. In this case, knowledge becomes venue to power abuse.
- In the information society there is global, timeless but virtual communication with all kinds of groups and people. This new communication habit, however, contributes to personal and social isolation from one's family, friends or social environment. Meet **the electronically connected and humanly disconnected individual!** Is this going to be a new client group for the human services?

Common Values And Tasks



II. Social Work and Human Rights

With all these areas of debate in mind, any social worker can see directly the link to human and social rights violation. The following chart depicts the common values and tasks addressed by Social Work and Human Rights (C. Vayas 1994).

2. Recent Milestones in Human Rights Protection

- United Nations Standard Rules (December 1993)
- Europe and the Global Information Society (E.U. May 1994)
- Building the European Information Society for us All (E.U. January 1996)
- E.U. State Legal Acts on Citizens Data Protection

3. Human Rights and Social Workers

- Professional social workers have become an important adjunct to the lawyer in maintaining individual rights and liberties.
- Social workers have helped define and secure modern economic and social rights.
- Whether social workers are involved in clinical or community practice, in planning of social policy or research, the challenge of protecting civil rights in contemporary social matters has the highest significance.

4. Human Rights – Threatened in the Information Society

- Civil and political
 - Right to freedom of thought
 - Freedom of conscience
 - Right to privacy and Family life
- Social Rights
 - Right of individual to use all available services, regardless of language, religion, origin, ideology.
 - Protection of human integrity
 - Protection of all social and political rights regardless of need
 - Full protection and prevention of human needs

III. Human Rights protection in the information society:

A new challenge in an old social work frontier?

5. Values and ethical dilemmas confronting the Social work student and the practitioner

- Confidentiality and personal data protection (Simitis 1987, EU-COM 1992)
- Ethical issues deriving from unethical use of I.T. applications (Glastonbury and Lamendola 1992, Berleur and Brunnstein 1996)
- Powerful and obscure decision making centers affecting client personal lives and disadvantaged social groups
- Gender discrimination and limitation of equal opportunities
- New marginal groups and problems of empowerment
- Problems in information access and in technology transfer. Namely, software is not culturally lead or even need-lead, since it is programmed in a different culture from the one used.
- Negative attitude from Human Service users. Powerlessness of the service consumers, who remain technology ignorant. (LAMSAC 1984)
- I.T. may become an instrument of social control.
- Insecurity, social risks, dehumanization processes.

6. Two observations for educators and service providers

- a) More and more people are asking for their needs to be served without moving out of their homes! They want Information Technology to slave – serve them, so they remain trouble-free and care-free! These are the home-service consumers!

Are they consenting, then, to a violation of their privacy and family life rights in the name of convenience?

They want to remain free from what? The right to think? To engage in real human relations, while caring for their everyday life? Is this a new kind of living? A new right? A new kind of agoraphobia? A new client group?

- b) In recent times, much is being published about young people and young adults surfing in the information highways for hours at a time. Researchers and behaviour analysts speak about a new form of addiction with

psychological and organic symptoms harmful to the user and his micro – environment.

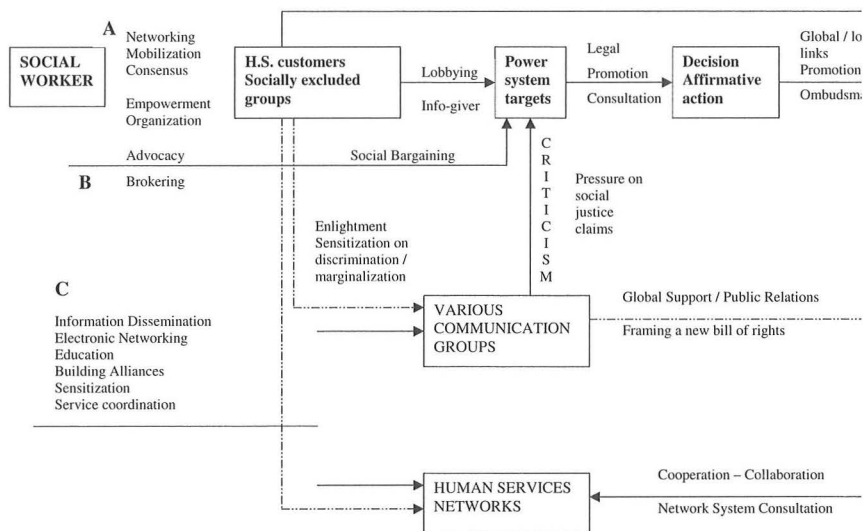
Terms like “computer maniacs” and “internet addicts” are common among I.T. users. Is this a cyberspace client group for social workers? Is protection of human integrity at risk?

Where is more suitable to look for help: in the traditional Human Services allocation settings or in a Virtual Reality social service?

The following chart (A) presents the roles and methods used by a social worker committed to the protection of human rights in the Information Society. Three venues are used, each one addressing a different target with its expected reaction towards the final task.

CHART A

SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY



C. VAYAS TEI A. GR

IV. Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

Facing the new realities of the evolving Information Society, Social Work educators and practitioners should direct attention to values and ethical dilemmas inherent in the use of Information Technology; realize the changing client systems; protect fundamental social work values; apply old and new skills in a more complex role matrix and with the use of information technology supported channels and practices.

Social workers must see in information technology applications, the chance to redefine old problems and to meet prevention and treatment goals in a more comprehensive way. Now, more than any other time, in the Schools of Social Work, educators should understand the importance of helping students integrate understanding of how clinical, community and policy issues are linked in a global/local practice.

The era of the Internet and globalization are shaping dynamic social, political and economic institutional arrangements, which interact and influence the well-being of individuals, families, communities and the operation of social organizations. Are we permitted to examine these influences from a limited, one tract standpoint?

The following remarks and suggestions form a kind of **alert issues** for social workers, which lead towards shaping their presence in the Information Era. Their roles are combining micro and macro tracts (Zastrow 1987, Wood and Middleman 1989, Wyers 1991), thus making the link in knowledge, values and skills aiming at “framing ethically” (Glastonbury and Lamendola, 1992) the advancement of new technologies in the human services and in the community.

7. Micro level of Intervention

The social workers' role is to be “an informed critic”; involved but human. An I.T. user but not artificial; placing client problems and his own in a more realistic basis, without losing his value orientation. However, using I.T. applications is not enough anymore. He or she has to become “literate” in the actual design of programs and take the lead in developing social software and appropriate agency organizational structures. Knowing the perils of human rights violation, he must insist on secure social work data bases and verification–evaluation of results.

Social work students must learn to be critical to data access and dissemination, where info-input sources are unknown, in order to avoid failures in practice or in planning. Everything in information technology is not transferable.

It is well known that the machine cannot replace human contact. The practitioners

have to safeguard their face-to-face contact and their “discrete authority” to help the vulnerable consumers. All social work “applications” cannot be copied by the computer.

As the culture and global values of the Information Society are becoming inherent of our lives, all societal institutions are being affected; Human relationships too. New forms of discrimination start prevailing and I.T. “abused” groups, such as the technology linked but socially alienated user or the Internet addict. For social workers these could be new clients, in need of novel approaches. Of course, there is room here for our old skills in advocacy, brokering and consultative support (Ife 2001). But new skills must be developed, I.T. adjusted and supported. For instance, we might have to help the service consumer understand the system the way its developers do; we might use empowerment techniques to assist client groups through information and service access and in networking electronically; we might be called to offer the service user a sense of justice and equality in treatment.

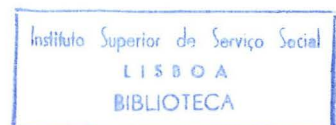
The New Technologies are changing the nature of society. They force people to redefine the limits and content of valuable individual social and political liberties, while, at the same time, offer new ways to secure and defend citizens from crime, abuse, disability and control. Social work education cannot afford to stay away from these developments. The Schools of Social Work must make room to address all these subjects into their curricula. Social service planners and managers cannot bypass these realities as well.

Both these domains – education and field work practice – must be linked and network together. Educators and practitioners should learn to work together and also collaborate with interstate initiatives, concerned with information technology in the human services and in social work practice.

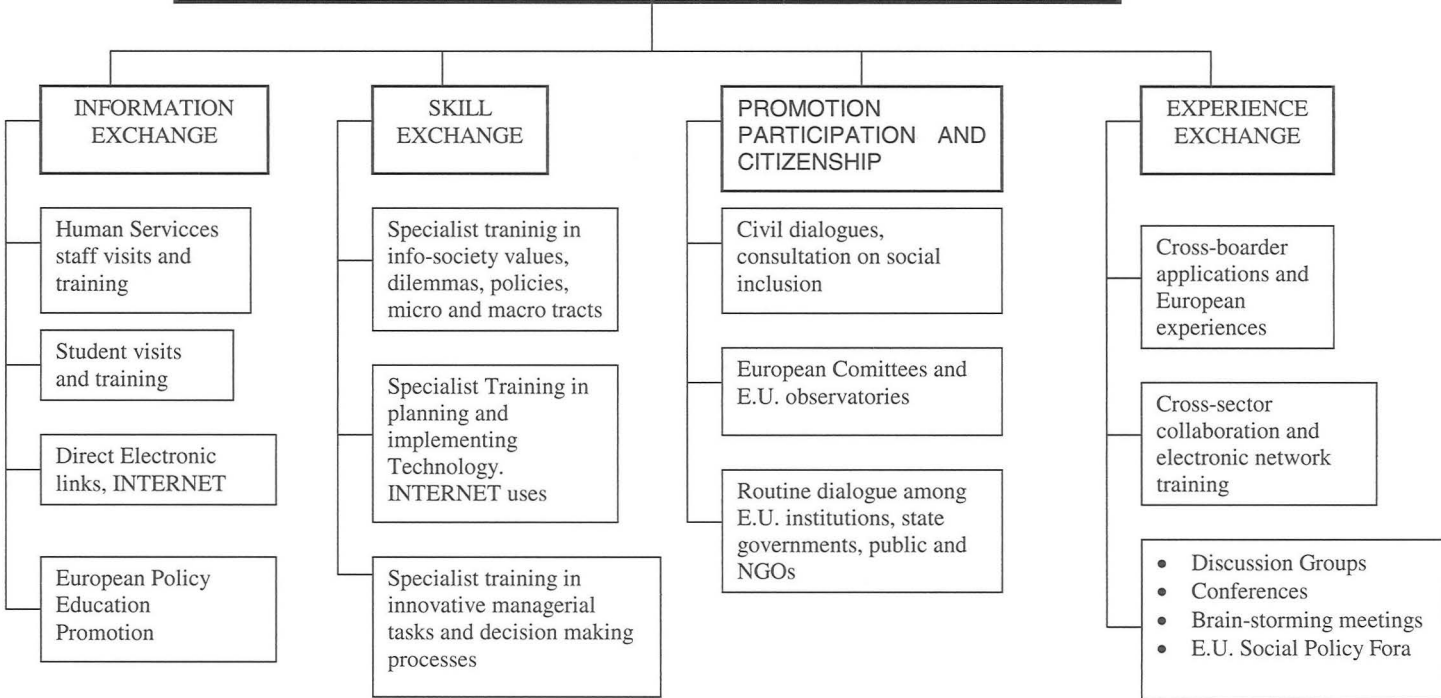
The following chart (B) pinpoints on the four-major tasks performed by a network for Social Work educators and practitioners in the European Information Society.

8. Macro level of Intervention

Social reform and individual change in the Information Society create a new framework for social work education and practice. They create the need for new social policy and for social environment modifications and adjustments. Social organizations and services must also upgrade and adapt their social products and delivery systems to protect consumers from the hazards of information technology misuse.



NETWORKING FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN THE EUROPEAN INFORMATION SOCIETY



European social organizations, mostly nongovernmental (NGO's) have taken positive steps towards strengthening their voice for the promotion of social rights and for social policy formulation. Cross-boarder sectoral alliances have become effective and even charise wide recognition.

We live in the Information Society and we all know that our lives and our institutions are getting positive and negative influences by this reality. Human Services organizations combating social exclusion, should become aware of the ways Information Technology can help them, in order to have a beneficial impact on behalf of their customers, and also obtain a global voice. New technologies may become a "facilitator" in building the civil society and in helping Human Services become actors with "globality" and with "political" clout in persuing social justice for all (C.Vayas 1999).

In chart (C) appears a spectrum of skills used by a professional social worker, in each track and in relation to seven levels of intervation.

9. Virtual Reality Level of intervention

A final statement should be made to the new type of social agencies appearing in the Internet. These virtual service allocators attempt to offer treatment and services and cover a large variety of needs in Cyberspace. Social workers could become part of the staff employed in such services.

How much of this new "electronic Social Work" has been the concern of European Schools of Social Work, in terms of knowledge, values and skills? How much aware are we of such practices?

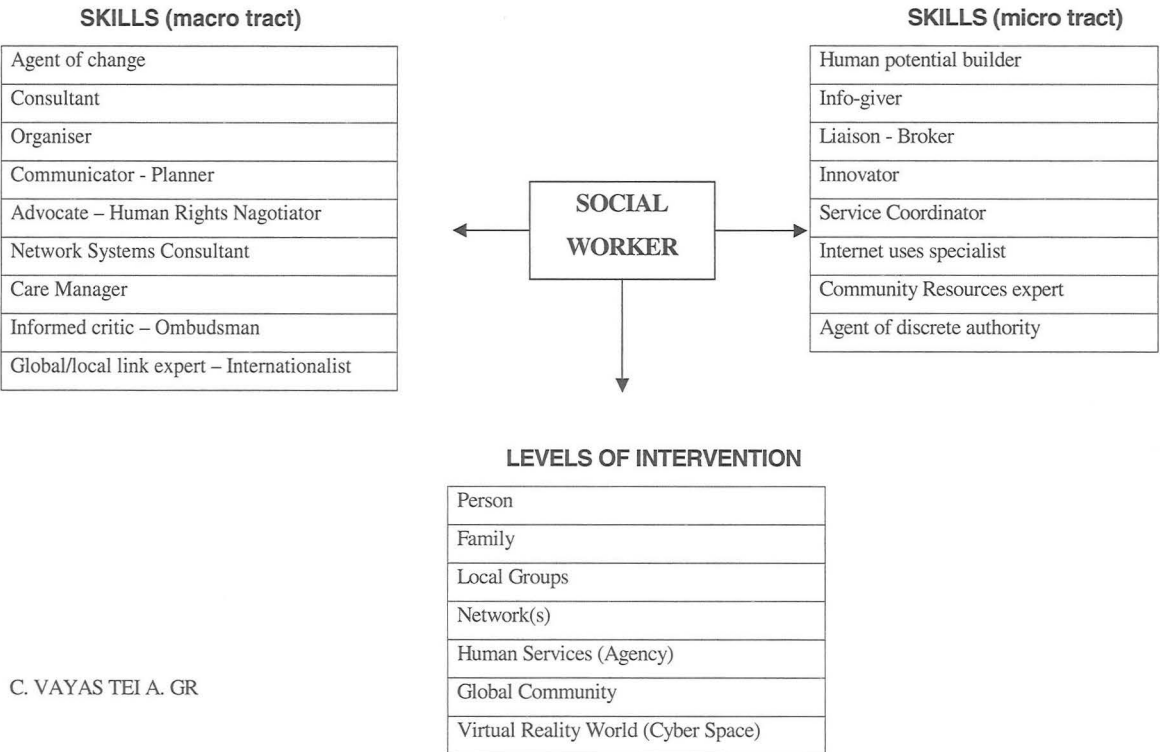
Is it unrealistic to assume that the education received at our schools is not following the pace of practice developments in the cyberspace order, and that, sooner or later, this will affect directly the quality of social work application?

"Electronic Social Work" needs to be planned, developed and applied carefully and with discretion, in order to a) avoid de-personalization of the enabling relationship, and b) maintain culturally and need-driven policy formulation and service planning.

It is only legitimate to find new ways of practice to serve new client systems. *Social work is bound with reality in the making. It should also become bound with virtual reality in the making, both to educators and social workers.* It is our duty to introduce the interstate dialogue, on how and what Social Work we should teach and practice in the European Information Society!

SKILLS SPECTRUM IN A HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Integrating micro and macro tracts to address personal issues, policies and practices that shape provision of services in the information society Chart 3.



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Notas

1 Encyclopedia of Social Work. NASW, U.S.A., p. 286.

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