

# Approaching Reading Clubs from a historical and sociological perspective

Georgios Bikos <sup>a</sup>, Panagiota Papadimitriou <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Department of Library and Information Systems, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Athens, Greece; Studies in European Civilisation, School of Humanities, the Hellenic Open University, Patra, Greece*

<sup>b</sup> *Department of Library and Information Systems, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Athens, Greece; Studies in European Civilisation, School of Humanities, the Hellenic Open University, Patra, Greece*

**Abstract:** In this paper, after referring to the phenomenon of Reading Clubs in various space and time intervals, we focus on its special aspects, such as the semi-public reading practice, which form the basis for the social and socialising functions performed by Reading Clubs. Later in our paper, we follow the development of such Clubs for students, children or adults in Greece and also look into the ways in which they evolve during the recession. It seems that, at least in Greece, Reading Clubs are a developing institution as the number of their members is increasing and their variety of themes is broadening. They are both an expression of the mechanisms of the civil society and also a form of self-organisation within that civil society.

**Keywords:** social institution, social groups, reading clubs in Greece, book clubs, philanagnosia.

## 1. The definition and social dimension of Reading Clubs

Reading Clubs (hereinafter RCs)<sup>1</sup> is a term we use to denote some informal groups consisting of a few members which are based on their members' self-commitment and established after initiatives taken by individuals or public bodies (libraries, unions, university schools, etc.). The members of these groups are basically engaged readers who come together in private or public places or even through the Internet to discuss, within a set of rules, about books they have read following a relevant agreement they have made among themselves. The same term also applies for large-scale groups originally appearing in the mass media (such as the boom of RCs in the USA mainly attributed to their promotion by Oprah Winfrey's TV show<sup>2</sup>) (Bryan, 1999), reading programmes implemented on a regional or national basis under the

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<sup>1</sup> In Greece the usual term is *Reading clubs*, but can also be found as Philanagnosia Clubs/Groups/Associations/Societies.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan, Carol. (1999). Oprah, just look what you've done! Library imagination paper, 21 (2).

responsibility of various agents (such as *One Read, One City* in the USA, the programme implemented by the National Book Centre of Greece (Greek acronym EKEBI), online networks of engaged readers, etc.).

## 2. The history of Reading Clubs

RCs have a long history as a social reading phenomenon since they have deep roots and have been around since reading exists<sup>3</sup>, a fact which makes it difficult for historians to trace their past. A primary form of RCs was some groups of people who met in order to read and render publicly philosophical or religious books mainly when manuscripts were very expensive and scarce. In any case, we can presume they have existed since the invention of printing, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Adams, 2007).

Clear references to social arrangements resembling RCs are spotted in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in Europe (Bikos, 2014; Leontsini, 2000). The literary salons – e.g. that of Mme. de Staël – in France, where important figures of literature, philosophy and politics met, Coffee Houses in England, where customers talked about the publications of the time, thus contributing to the establishment of the freedom of speech (Day, 1995), the literary circles of British women (e.g. the “bluestockings”, who were named after the outfit of one of their popular guests. See the American cyclopaedia, 1879) and RCs of men (such as the Dalton Book Group which was founded in 1764 and is still active to date. See the Oldest book club, 2014; Day, 1995) are all characteristic cases of such arrangements. At the same time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the USA, groups of women met regularly to discuss poetry, literature, etc., in places like Corn Belt, Illinois, in 1877 or in Quincy in 1866 (Adams, 2007; FictionFaerie in History, 2012). As the century advanced the publishing business was flourishing while the number of American women who clustered together in RCs, seeking an opportunity for self-education within them, was gradually increasing. As the century was coming to a close, RCs of men started appearing.<sup>4</sup>

Later the increased percentage of literacy and easier access to publications contributed to a rapid increase in the number of RCs in Europe and the USA. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century participation in RCs had soared. By conservative estimates about 250,000 people were members of RCs in the USA in 1994, while, in 2002, there were about 750,000 RC members and more than 5,000,000 in 2011 ([Newsweek Staff](#), 2002; Heller, 2011). The UK follows a similar course with more than 50,000 RCs today (Viner, 2013). Of course, the precise number of RCs and their members cannot be exactly estimated, as their action is an extensive social phenomenon, but largely private.

## 3. Reading Clubs and the Internet

Moreover, the above estimates do not include online RC members. It is a fact that as the Internet provides the means to bring discussions into Cyberspace, it plays a key role in supporting the establishment and operation of RCs. Thus, online interconnection and the options for synchronous or asynchronous communication,

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<sup>3</sup> “Reading groups have been around for as long as reading”, Jenny Hartley says emphatically (Viner, 2013). As reading is not a timeless, ideologically neutral practice, it is undoubted that the establishment of reading circles is part of a complex of historic and social parameters. For a general approach to this, see Akritidou 2010a, 2010b.

<sup>4</sup> For example: The Cadmus Club, the Grolier Club in New York, the Club of Odd Volumes in Boston and the Rowfant Club in Cleveland (FictionFaerie in History, 2012).

and also e-books, e-readers, etc. available on the Internet, all facilitate RCs to evolve rapidly in diverse forms of a limited or international caliber (e.g. RCs hosted by Twitter and Facebook<sup>5</sup> or other online social networks, websites on international platforms, such as LibraryThing and GoodRead<sup>6</sup> etc.)<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the Internet also provides support to conventional face-to-face RCs, as there are numerous sources of information relating to their organisation, examples of their action, suggestions about books – topics for discussion etc.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Factors leading to the appearance and development of Reading Clubs

Apart from the Internet, however, the following factors played an essential role in the expansion of RCs:

a. the interest of the scientific and, more specifically, educational community, expressed through research projects and the development of relevant articles related to various aspects of the issue.

b. the support they enjoyed by the media and relevant radio and television programmes, such as Oprah Winfrey's very popular TV book club in the USA (active from 1996 to 2011). RCs have been promoted not only by the mass media but also by the show business as a whole. To this end, you can often find literary books, films or even episodes in television series with topics related to RCs<sup>9</sup>. (There are even RCs discussing these very films/series.)

It can be easily assumed that book professionals express even greater interest in RCs. More specifically, since the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, major publishers have been releasing publications which relate to RCs in various ways more and more regularly, they accompany their publications with Guidebooks about RCs, they post author biographies and tips about interesting discussions for readers on their websites and make it easier for RC members to contact authors either in person or through the Internet (see, Bosmanjan, in particular, 2014), thus investing on their sales increase.

Public-Municipal Libraries also promote the role of RCs; they establish RCs which can meet the needs of their local communities as they consider them to be the tools to promote philanagnosia<sup>10</sup> and also a clever way to attract new readers. They even ensure they have several book copies, arranged in packages, ready to be used by RCs and provide rooms which can welcome them or serve as venues to organise film nights with relevant themes etc.<sup>11</sup> (Dempsey, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The case of "A Year of Books", a Facebook community founded by M. Zuckerberg on New Year's Day in 2015, is characteristic; the purpose of the community is for members to exchange views on books they have read. In a few days the community numbered more than 140,000 members [https://www.facebook.com/ayeurofbooks/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/ayeurofbooks/info?tab=page_info). See also Brown, 2015a, 2015b. Thousands of readers share views on books also on Twitter, using links such as #amreading and #bookclub.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in [https://www.goodreads.com/group/show\\_tag/bookclub?page=1](https://www.goodreads.com/group/show_tag/bookclub?page=1) thousands of RCs are listed.

<sup>7</sup> Today the Internet offers a wealth of new options that make communication easier. Thus, RCs develop new electronic mechanisms of communication in order to inform their members about the programme of meetings etc. There are online reading communities, blogs of booklovers, literature blogs, online sites where readers meet, social networking websites. (Akritidou, 2010a, 2010b).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the possibilities offered by the Internet, see Akritidou 2010b.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the book: *The Jane Austen Book Club: A Novel* by Karen Joy Fowler which was also adapted to a film (Fowler, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> The term *philanagnosia* is a compound word from the Ancient Greek verb *φιλω*, which means 'love', and the noun *ἀνάγνωση*, which means 'reading', i.e. love of reading.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the website of a Library in the USA: <http://www.keokuk.lib.ia.us/books-reading/bookdiscussion>.

## 5. Special features of Reading Clubs and their mode of operation

So the number of RCs is rising rapidly worldwide. At the same time, the variety – which, in any case, is inherent in the nature of RCs - in their organisational structure, size and composition is also growing. Out of the various features of RCs, we shall focus here on those we consider to be the most essential, such as:

The flexibility and diversity in the themes and mode of operation within RCs. Each RC has an exclusive identity, as its members are distinct personalities. Moreover, certain features of a club are unique: its organisation, its theme and its approach to it. Therefore, the kinds of RCs may be innumerable; the same applies for their modes of operation. In fact, the diversity of the individuals who set up a reading club and the variety of their views on the texts to be discussed are both key factors to its success. As an indication, RCs may differ as to the age or gender of their members, the person or body that organises them, the kind of books studied and the interests of their members (literature, poetry, a particular author, mystery, fiction, mathematical literature, philosophy, gastronomy, etc.).

On the other hand, RCs require their members to follow few basic rules and a timetable, with the necessary adjustments as to the time and place of meetings. In fact, this feature is what distinguishes them from the meetings of a simple company of friends, i.e. the periodicity of their meetings and the mutually accepted adjustments, as to the time of attendance, the structure of discussions, etc. and the meeting place (cafés, restaurants, Libraries, bookshops, professional premises, sometimes private residences, even churches or prisons, etc.).

Another thing we should note about RCs as social groups and as a form of group structure is that they do not conform to rules of internal hierarchy nor do they exhibit a hierarchical internal structure, as is the case in other social groups. However, in many clubs, someone has the role of the coordinator of operation and discussion (usually an experienced reader or the one who inspired the idea).

The next feature of RCs that we shall focus on emerges from adopting an anthropological perspective: the operation of RCs is beyond books and reading, since it relates to the ways the individuality of subjects weaves a web of communication and a “space-framework” of physical/cyber gathering of those who are part of a specific reading audience. So, the issue of communication between their members is of decisive importance and every analysis of their operation should put more weight to it. Given that, we should make special reference to: a) the intergroup relations (marked by equality and parity) and b) the diversity in the ways their communicative relations are articulated. So, e.g. in an online reading club, communication does not develop the same dynamics as in a traditional RC, since there is no personal contact – although it may be possible (Lombardi, 2015).

Using a more sociological filter in our analysis, we note that RCs are a reading practice-*bridge* which connects reading – an act we regard as solitary and mute today (Bikos, 2014) – to public discussion. The image of a reader, which has been prevalent for many years now, is that of a lonely person that enjoys his/her book in silence. Showing interest in books does not have to be a solitary process, though, since it can literally become a *social* practice. This is what the idea of RCs highlights, as within their framework a book becomes a group’s, not a person’s, business. RCs are founded on a semi-public practice, as they arrange their gatherings in places which may not be private, but only welcome their own members to participate in

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those gatherings. In addition, via its operation, each RC associates, in an organised and structural manner, personal-solitary reading with collective conversational processing of the texts that each of its members separately has previously read.

Consequently, silence, introversion and mute/inner mental operation which all form the basis for the act of reading, are redeemed in RCs with a totally expressive and vocal mental activity, which turns individuals into teams and solitary readers almost into companies. Thus, through RCs, reading, originally related to the acquisition of written speech, supplies material to an activity which develops an oral expression and dialogue, in other words, a conversation, but also a physical inter-individual - interpersonal communicative relationship which attributes voice and gives the floor, not to the members' readings themselves, but to the thoughts that they produce on the basis of them.

## **6. The reasons behind the establishment of Reading Clubs in the light of sociology and psychology**

Why do millions of people of all social categories decide to make a *self-commitment* and participate in an RC though? This question may be answered differently depending on the type of RCs; obviously, there are different reasons why prisoners participate in an RC<sup>12</sup>, housewives in a country town or busy citizens in a large city.

In our attempt to answer this question, we note that a factor that attracts people to RCs is their love for books and reading. Why do we like books, though? In his book *The necessity of art*, the author Ernst Fischer claims that this is because Man has always been fighting against the partiality of his personal life, tending towards a feeling of contentment that he experiences and longs for; towards a life contentment he is deprived of as a result of his individuality and all of its limitations; towards a world more understandable and more just; a world that *gives life a meaning*. Therefore, we enjoy reading because through the books we read we connect to others, we have experiences, we become *whole*. "We read to know we are not alone," said C.S. Lewis, since, obviously, as readers of a book we participate in a *fictional community* consisting of all those who are reading or have read a book, *together* with its author.

And something more: it seems that social isolation reduces the desire of some people to read; so the team spirit that characterises RCs promotes the act of reading and philanagnosia (Hoog, 2014).

The desire of the individual for knowledge and social "elevation"/advancement/rise seems to be another reason why we become members of an RC. As RCs offer the chance for cultural development, they may act as a "social tool" for the culturally deprived and socially isolated. For example, this was a key dimension of the RCs in the USA in the early '60s, when they acted as a lifeline for the socially isolated in some areas of the American province. This key dimension can be traced back to the first women's RCs, when, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with women "*wearing white gloves and hats, drinking tea and reading*", (Jacobson in Kyrka, 2009; Manual) there were also unprivileged women who sought in RCs the right tools to build a stronger identity and assert their intellectual autonomy through self-education outside an educational system to which – especially on its tertiary level – they had no easy access (Heller, 2011). The case of hundreds of RCs where women studied Shakespeare at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is characteristic.

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<sup>12</sup> For the case of Prison Reading Groups, which have been active in the UK for the last 15 years, see Viner, 2013.

Through these RCs women struggled to improve their lives and also fought for major social issues, such as voting rights for women and other social rights (Scheil, 2012).

We should also remember that the ability to read and understand texts has always carried heavy social weight and a symbolic dimension (Bikos, 2014). Before the Enlightenment, literacy skills were an indicator of social achievement, as only upper social classes could read. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, technological advances and social evolution made books affordable and led to the gradual establishment of compulsory education and a great increase in the percentage of literacy (Bikos, 2014). Nowadays, in the western world, reading has become an inseparable part of society (Bikos, 2014) and a high social status cannot be proved by literacy, but mainly by the kind of someone's readings and how easy it is to access educational goods.

Today the majority of RCs do not aim at knowledge acquisition, which is the case for schools. Besides, most school RCs aim at offering informal educational benefits, broader cultural advancement and mental ability development. However, this social side of RCs is maintained, where applicable, and can be traced more in those clubs which develop on the geographic and/or social margin (e.g. in prisons, isolated areas, etc.). The members of those RCs benefit both from the educational material offered for further processing and the human relations that develop within their framework. The programmes aimed at the homeless developed by Libraries in the USA are characteristic of that kind of RCs as they contribute to the improvement of the people's quality of life by boosting their self-esteem and the sense of belonging to a community. These programmes also allow librarians to specify the needs of the participants and link them with resources that will satisfy these needs (Lilienthal, 2011). Following a similar philosophy, the participation of prisoners in Library programmes for RCs, where they discuss with judges and librarians, seems to have a therapeutic effect, too; on the one hand, because participants explore their own lives and choices as they discuss about books and, on the other, because through their participation in a team where everyone is on par with everyone else, they build a more solid self-esteem (Dempsey, 2011).

Another factor that explains why individuals decide to become members of an RC is the fulfillment of an inner human need to belong to a group, which, in this case, is expressed as a desire to participate in a social framework which offers regular and rather easy-going experiences of socialisation and interpersonal-social relationships. Of course, in this case also, RCs are divided on a scale which ranges from group meetings totally devoted to serious discussions of engaged readers to those which are used rather as an "excuse" for social meetings, as an economical solution for entertainment or even as an opportunity to make new friends or even... flirt (Burbach, 2011; Viner, 2013). It is obvious that a meeting in adult RCs, apart from a pleasant interaction offers contact-communication with other people sharing the same passion for philanagnosia, may also include various other social activities that are pleasant and entertaining (meals-drinks-coffee, meetings with authors, trips to places mentioned in a book, theatre or cinema, watching book-to-film adaptations, staging plays, etc.). So RCs are not only related to the passion about books but are also connected with "ulterior" motives (Bonesteel, 2014).

Therefore, it becomes clear that participating in an RC constitutes an experience of reading and communication with a social dimension and "benefits" of a psychological texture/order.

Finally, in search of the reasons why people turn to RCs, we should make special reference to popular online RCs; these are a perfect solution for today's busy people

who “meet” others from all over the world from the comfort of their laptops, wherever they may be. Some of today’s conventional RCs have also introduced features, such as finding members and communicating through the social media or even changing the form of books used or the mode of reading (ebooks, ereaders). What remains stable, however, is love of reading and books and the desire to share someone’s reading experience with others.

## 7. Reading Clubs in Greece

Further down we are discussing the development of RCs for children and adults in Greece in relation to the country’s special historic and social profile, and also the ways in which the phenomenon is evolving in today’s time of recession.

In Greece, there are no traces of RC action in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the ’30s we find some social groupings which resemble RCs,, in literary coffee shops – similar to those that we find in Europe – such as “Korais”, “Panellinion” and “Brazilian” in Athens, while some RCs are active in Athens and the Cyclades in the ’50s (Manual, p. 9). Of course, RCs may have been active elsewhere in Greece from time to time in previous decades, but their course is uncharted and unclear. Things seem to change in the last decade and we see – after a long delay in comparison to other countries – RCs being established also in Greece with themes, organisation and operation that follow the standards that apply worldwide. This delay may be attributed to the lack of a powerful current of engaged readers in Greece until recently – even though a recent survey reveals the establishment of an audience of “bookworms” (Results, 2011)<sup>13</sup>.

The operation of RCs in Greece is marked by the following special features:

a. The majority of RCs were created by public and State entities (e.g. public libraries, Municipal authorities, State schools) – and were later supported by the State, private individuals or privately-owned entities – not by what we would call *the grassroots* or *social groups*. We have witnessed the establishment of RCs with such a grassroots and private base only in the last few years:

b. Emphasis was placed on *school* RCs, which are also designed centrally, by State bodies. In fact, many school RCs today are approved by the Ministry of Education as extracurricular programmes of school activities, while others are connected with the school curriculum (i) as RC actions taking place during the “hour for philanagnosia” which is included in the curriculum, in other words we have a mixed version of RCs here or (ii) as informal actions, usually of a small caliber and dynamics, which take place in the classroom and/or school, thanks to initiatives taken by teachers on a purely voluntary basis.

c. The operation of RCs has been expanding and intensifying since the recession started. This is *also* true both as far as the promotion of RCs by the State or other private entities is concerned *and* as regards the action taken to create RCs by the so-called *civil society*.

It is ascertained, however, that RCs in Greece are marked by indigence as far as research and bibliography are concerned, a fact that is not consistent with their action and number, as witnessed in the last decade. This indigence, however, which

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<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, the reading culture in Europe is deeper and wider in relation to Greece. The differences between Greek and European readers are quantitative and qualitative. (Pasamichali, 2011)

is in contrast to the plethora of relevant international papers, may be attributed to the difficulty to charter the field of RCs.

Before completing our paper, we shall refer to the “milestones” of RCs in Greece; the National Book Centre of Greece (EKEBI) and the society *Thales and Friends*. Note that, however, some educational Organisations, several Public and Municipal or other Libraries, publishing houses and some cultural associations *also* established RCs. These Libraries, though, express initiatives that derive from society, i.e. the *civil society*.

EKEBI was a non-profit public legal entity established in 1994 by the Ministry of Education. Its purpose was to design and apply a national policy for the promotion of books and reading through institutional interventions and special programmes (Observatory for books, Reading behaviour surveys, Biblionet, workshops, documentations, archives, etc.).

More specifically, a) in 2007 it organised presentations of RCs, in cooperation with authors, in several cities in Greece (Archive of Civilisation, 2006; Velissari, 2006), in an effort to promote their foundation. Moreover, it organised supportive structures (a special space in the EKEBI hub to record and find RCs throughout Greece, provision and exchange of information among RCs) and produced informative material (leaflets for adult and children-teenager RCs and a relevant manual).

b. in cooperation with the Association of Greek Librarians and Information Scientists (hereinafter GreekLIS) in 2009 it called representatives from the field of education, culture, local government and publishers for a meeting entitled: “The role of Reading Clubs in Libraries as part of the initiative for mental development and promotion of philanagnosia” (Review of operations, 2010). As a result, a network of 58 Public and Municipal Libraries which ran RCs was organised throughout Greece. The network worked under the auspices of EKEBI and GreekLIS in cooperation with the Society of Authors. EKEBI initially promoted the above RCs on its own with the aid of 22 authors, presenting them in various cities of the country, while later, RCs themselves invited authors. Following this practice, the interest of the public was toned up, while at the same time authors found the right place to bring their work into the spotlight.

c. it supported the operation of RCs in schools. From 2011 in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, it implemented an extensive Philanagnosia programme<sup>14</sup>, within which one hundred RCs were founded in an equal number of schools following the motto “one reading club in every school”.

At the same time, it undertook the support of the “hour for philanagnosia” which had been included in the curriculum of all-day primary schools and included philanagnosia actions, such as the establishment of RCs (the mixed version we mentioned above). Moreover, EKEBI promoted the operation of RCs through the training of teachers and educational executives and the organisation of a broad programme of school visits by book contributors. This effort seems to have found positive response from educational professionals. In a survey conducted in 2013 in schools in Attica about the attitudes of teachers in relation to EKEBI’s Philanagnosia programme, it became clear that teachers believed that this programme contributed to the improvement of school performance and the students’ overall cultural and personal development. Moreover, the teachers stressed the great response the

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<sup>14</sup> The Ministry of Education in cooperation with EKEBI implemented the Act “Innovative actions to promote philanagnosia” as part of the Business Programme “Education and Lifelong Learning 2007-2013” which stretched in three school years (2011-14).



programme received from students and believed that these philanagnosia actions should be continued and further supported (Psicharaki, 2013).

In parallel with all these, RCs started to appear all over Greece; more specifically, until 2009 around 200 RCs were recorded. Among these were clubs discussing detective stories, ancient Greek literature, cooking, classical music, clubs about emotional intelligence at work or for people with visual impairment, clubs all around Greece, such as “Diavasteri” (the Studious) on Samos island, “Lichnostatis” (the Lamp Bracket) in Herakleion, Crete, “Anisiches Ginekes” (Concerned Women) in Volos, etc. (Routsonis, 2009). The number of recorded RCs continued to grow. Today, on EKEBI’s website, we can count 374 RCs (271 for adults and 103 for children) in Greece (and 6 for adults – 2 for children in Cyprus). We do not know, however, if all clubs were recorded or and when was the last time their number was updated. Here we stress not only that the phenomenon of RCs, as we have already underlined, is variable and unchartered, but also that in the beginning of the year 2013 – time of recession – EKEBI was abolished (Baskozos, 2013).

The abolition of EKEBI left a vacuum that will be hard to fill (Apostolidou, 2014), a vacuum that is replaced by the good will and voluntary work offered by people. Today, in 2015, the “hour for philanagnosia” is applied in all Primary schools. Since 2013, however, it no longer receives EKEBI’s invaluable support and its effectiveness now depends exclusively on the efforts of teachers. Many of them, however, had attended relevant EKEBI seminars together with primary education executives and then acted as multipliers for the rest of teachers.

Today, through these and other dynamic teachers, philanagnosia actions continue and, in many cases, include the operation of RCs. We should also note that according to a survey conducted in Primary schools of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Educational Region of Athens, which mainly includes the western suburbs of the Attica basin, more than 50% of the cultural programmes included in the institutional framework being implemented in recent years are either directly or indirectly related to philanagnosia.

At this point, we shall briefly present the findings of another survey about RCs, according to which school RCs have an impact on:

- Promoting philanagnosia, since they aim at advancing the habit of reading and promoting love for books.
- Establishing contact with the world of knowledge, something that older members of clubs particularly appreciate.
- Establishing friendships and learning to cooperate.
- Making constructive use of free time – they state that “they rest in a creative way” when they are there.
- Developing fully the personality of their members by stimulating their creative and critical thinking, their imagination, their aesthetic development and enrichment of lingual expression in an emotive and pleasant way.
- Building a strong personality, as they state that in an RC they become more aware of themselves and acquire self-esteem.
- Finally, the activities that RCs develop turn them into social and cultural poles of attraction in the local community they serve (Giannopoulou, 2015).

Before we close, let us make a reference to the group “*Thales+Friends*”; it is a private initiative, an initiative of the grassroots, in other words, which proceeded to a central planning to support the operation of RCs in schools, which had, initially at least, a specific thematic orientation: mathematical literature.

More specifically, *Thales+Friends* was founded in 2005 by the mathematicians–authors Apostolos Doxiadis, Tefkros Mihailidis and Petros Dellaportas, who shared a common interest to “marry” mathematics with narrative. After the first conference

entitled “Mathematics and Narrative”, where it was pinpointed that mathematics has withdrawn from broader culture and that narrative can play the role of an intermediary, they decided to create RCs in schools, with the cooperation of volunteer teachers and a thematic emphasis on mathematics and sciences, through *mathematical literature*.

The few RCs, which first operated under the umbrella of *Thales+Friends* (20 in Piraeus in the first year [Karouzakis, 2010]), became dozens in due course. Their rapid increase throughout Greece can be attributed also to the community of mathematicians who were searching for ways to bring students closer to their science. *Thales+Friends* has created more than 350 RCs which are also a role model for school RCs in other countries (Karouzakis, 2010). They work very effectively, according to their coordinators (Papanikolaou, 17), are supported by events, lectures, workshops, conferences and even “mathematical festivals”, acting as an opportunity for their members to meet each other and present their work – for example, the annual Event for Reading Club Workshops which lasts for many days (Kyrka, 2009). And the RCs that operate in Greece since the school year 2006-07 to date (2015) are presented on a map on *Thales+Friends'* website. On this map, you can also see relevant adult RCs since the group *Thales+Friends* is now planning to create adult RCs with a broad range of themes including sciences, philosophy, history, classic literature, etc. Besides, *Thales+Friends* has worked together with EKEBI to promote the RCs it organised since 2007, in cooperation with authors, in various cities in Greece (Archive of Civilisation, 2006).

Completing our reference to the entities that promoted RCs in Greece, we shall refer briefly to the RCs which are linked to Public–Municipal or other organised Libraries. So libraries promote RCs, both for children and adults, within the framework of their reading policy, aiming at broadening – attracting a reading audience or even training users how to be readers. Many of the RCs working within the framework or sharing the same place with Libraries had and still have an autonomous status while others worked in cooperation with EKEBI. The foundation of a network of 58 Libraries that also include RCs established by EKEBI, which we mentioned above, is characteristic, together with the meeting “Reading Clubs – actions in the Municipal Libraries of Northern Greece” which was co-organised by EKEBI and GreekLIS in 2011 to create even more RCs in Libraries, following the example of other countries (Kerasta, 2011).

However, in recent years, more and more RCs are operating thanks to initiatives taken by publishing houses and bookshops – such as three RCs of the bookshop complex *Metaixmio* which has been active since 2006 (Diamantopoulou, 2011; Malliarou, 2014) – or regional educational administrative mechanisms, such as those promoted by the Directorates of Primary and Secondary Education as part of the actions organised by the Department of Cultural Issues.

At the same time, following the above aspects of the phenomenon of RC operation, RCs in recent years are sprouting everywhere in Greece – and such Clubs become more and more popular, after initiatives taken by simple engaged readers. RCs of various themes (cooking, Cretan literature, relevant to the works of Dostojewski, books on ecology, poetry, etc.) are set up in houses, cafés, neighbourhoods and have names that are really interesting, such as *The garden of secrets*, *Spring*, *Rubber* etc. (Diamantopoulou, 2011; Volanaki, 2011). So it seems that quite a few people are regularly gathered around selected books to exchange views and get to know each other and, either directly or indirectly, talk about themselves. Because even a phrase beginning with “From my point of view, the writer of this book means to say that...”, is nothing but a phrase that describes how

the person who talks sees the object of reading – therefore it is a statement that relates to his/her self.<sup>15</sup>

We assume that the growth in the phenomenon of RCs in Greece is also affected by a growing reading public, and also the increased number of books that Greek readers read, which is ascertained in a survey by EKEBI, according to which recession seems to make people turn to books (Results, 2011). What also plays a role is broader and more detailed information of the public – mainly through the Internet – about developments abroad concerning movements of book lovers, widespread on the Internet, such as RCs and exchange libraries, which were unknown until recently in our country.

## 8. Conclusions in the light of social sciences

Closing our paper, we should make the following sociological points:

RCs constitute a form of a social group within which readers talk about what they have read; they talk, in other words, about something they have done while being mute given that for centuries now the dominant method of reading has been the silent one (Bikos, 2014). The most important aspect though, from a sociological and anthropological perspective, is that through RCs a solitary, private and personal act, such as reading, leads to the establishment of some kind of social groups, within which the person passes from the individual and solitary to the collective-group and from the private to the semi-public – i.e. to a “social space” where the individual makes his thoughts public announcing them to certain “others”. So RCs function as social institutions<sup>16</sup> that counterbalance the individual and silent element that characterises reading – particularly as a 20<sup>th</sup>-century practice when neither public (Bikos, 2014) nor loud reading (Bikos, 2014) exists anymore. At the same time, RCs create new forms of sociality and social gatherings through conversations and discussions that develop within the framework of a special type of social groups that they form.

Moreover, we think their socialising role is also obvious, a fact which justifies the increase in recent years in the number of RCs working as part of School Libraries, *originating* from them or because of them.

So from an overall perspective, an important positive element deriving from the operation of RCs goes beyond the world of books, as it relates to the individual itself and our/its society. It is this crack, albeit minor, that their operation causes to the self-centered structure of our modern mass society which makes Man more to confine him/herself than to live as a member of collective and social groups.

Finally, as more and more RCs are being founded by private initiatives, we ascertain that the *civil society* is steadily expanding its activities; more specifically, activities that are linked with initiatives and movements of self-regulation, self-organisation and self-institutionalisation inspired and substantiated by small groups. As social state/welfare state policies are minimised - as is the case on a

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<sup>15</sup> According to the spokesperson of *Metaixmio* bookshop complex “people remained members of our clubs exactly because they liked the process of the whole meeting, they felt charmed that other members saw a character of the book they had read from a different perspective and revealed that perspective to them, that they could listen to many different thoughts and take part in a beautiful conversation.” (Kokouvas, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Every (social) institution is considered to be such because of a complex of structured and relatively stable relations through which arrangements are established relating to the space and time. RCs are social institutional structures exactly because they constitute arrangements (of periodicity and regularity) in time – the regular intervals when their members meet -, and space – the spaces predetermined by the entity that creates the RC or by all or some “leading” members as meeting points for their members.

global level since the late 70s - though, especially those that regulate social issues and ensure that citizens have basic access (particularly those of weaker classes) to some educational and/or cultural goods such as reading and books, the society and citizens' groups seem to be all the more active – and are *forced* to do so – in an effort to counterbalance this gap created as a result of the absence of State intervention. Therefore, the form that RCs take today, particularly how they are established, is rather useful, for purposes of analysis on the side of social sciences, to become perceived as an aspect of *civil society* activation as part of its effort to be entertained in a way that ensures a more substantial – yet pleasant – contact with literate culture, and more specifically with one of its key components, i.e. The *Book*.

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