

(Free pdf) The Social Life of Information

The Social Life of Information

John Seely Brown, Paul Duguid

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John Seely Brown, Paul Duguid : The Social Life of Information before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Social Life of Information:

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Superb Primer for Any AgeBy Robert David STEELE VivasI come to this book eight years after it was first published, and with all the accolades and superb reviews that it has already accumulated, my primary focus here, apart from flagging the book for those that follow my reviews, is to suggest that it is one of the finest overviews available and easily exploited as a primer for undergraduates, graduates, or adults

pursuing their own continuing education via , which is now the hub of the World Brain.As is my custom, I provide here a few highlights from my flyleaf notes, and then link to ten books that can be used to study discrete aspects of the digital age as I have come to understand it.This is one of the best books I have found that makes the case that "fiber to the forehead" is next to worthless, it is not about acquiring more information, but rather about the nuanced networking and social interpretations of information in context.Indeed, they say that with all the technologies now pushing and creating digital information, consumption of this information is only increasing among individuals by 1.7 percent a year.I value this book, in part because I have seen the U.S. secret intelligence community lose its mind, today spending \$60 billion a year of the taxpayer's hard-earned money, to create monstrous and often counter-productive technical program that access the 4% of the information we can steal, while ignoring the 94% that is in 183 languages we do not speak, and more often than not, NOT online.The authors write well, and gifted turns of phrase about, such as "the radical instability of infopunditry."They do a superb job of addressing the ills of technology-centered tunnel vision, a point that Peter Drucker made in Forbes ASAP 28 Aug 98, and I repeated in my keynote in Vegas to the National Security Agency (NSA) IT conference, in the early 2000 timeframe. We've spent the past 50 years on the T in IT, we need to start focusing on the I now.The authors are eloquent in saying that more of the same is not the answer, and I totally agree. Returning to the secret world, I paraphrase an Australian journalist commenting on the pathologies of secret programs, who said that giving more money to dysfunctional secret agencies is like pouring gasoline on a fire. Right on. I want to reduce the secret budget to \$12 billion a year, and redirect everything else to US education, global access to open sources in all languages, and free on demand education to the five billion poor via a network of 100 million volunteers with skype and internet access who can answer a cell phone question in any of 183 languages: education "one cell call at a time."The authors point out that at its best, technology augments and enhances human capabilities, it does not replace them (less the truly repetitive mechanical aspects).They observe (in 2000) that 1-2 exabytes of information per year are created, but that much of this is not useful, and there is a major short-fall in sense-making and precision access.They discuss, most usefully, the reality that designers underestimate what people do (and I would add, what they want or need)."Information fetishism" is defined as the belief that information and information technology can replaced nuanced relations among people and their individual and shared insights. In Body of Secrets, link below, Jim Bamford ends his second book on NSA by saying that with all the trillions they have spent, they have still not built the ultimate computer, one that runs on a tiny amount of energy, weighs less than a few pounds, and can make petabyte calculations per second: "the human brain."The authors respond to earlier criticism about not addressing LINUX, and point out that LINUX is social innovation, not technical innovation. See Wealth of Networks below.They note that the primary advantage of IT is that it enhances both local and global access. On the downside, it neglects periphery and context.The authors reassert, compellingly, the value of intermediation, and I am reminded of our earlier criticisms of the Internet, still valid, in that most information is unedited, unformatted, unpaginated, undated, and lacking in source bias insight. This is still true, and Google is making it worse.By the authors own account, this book addresses:1) Limits of infopunditry2) Challenges of software agents3) Social character of work and learning4) Limits of management theory5) Resources for innovation6) Unnoticed aspects of the document7) Implications for design8) Future of information, especially for universityI have a couple of nits, but not enough to warrant removal of one star. This is clearly a seminal work of lasting value.Nit #1: Organizational Intelligence (Wilensky, 1967) is not to be found in this book. The authors do not go past Quadrant III (see loaded images).Nit #2: While they have a superb bibliography and include works by Barlow, Kelly, Strassmann, Toffler, and Turkle, they do NOT include the seminal works directly relevant to this book, specifically, Barlow's seminal manifesto, and the following:Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, the Economic WorldInformation PayoffPowershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Power at the Edge of the 21st CenturyThe Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit , Twentieth Anniversary Edition limits us to ten links. See my earlier lists (the first ten) for 300+ books covering information and intelligence. Here are six more:The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the PastBody of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security AgencyFog Facts: Searching for Truth in the Land of SpinThe Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and FreedomI regret the limitation on links. See also such gems as Forbidden Knowledge; Voltaire's Bastards; Age of Missing Information; etc etc.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A classic and a landmark text on organizational behaviorBy Chris KiessBrown Duguid's book is a staple in my knowledge management class - a class that places organizations under a microscope and investigates behavior, knowledge sharing and information flow. I have been using this book for years and though it is over 10 years old now, most of what is written (if not all) is still pertinent. It's actually a bit frightening at how they point out organizational blunders that still happen today.This book is a unique mix of psychology, organizational behavior/psychology, information science and how manage gets managed (or doesn't get managed) in organizations. If you work in the information sciences, HR or in some sort of knowledge management capacity, this book should be on your reading list. It is a staple for those working in these industries.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Important but overdone critique of info-enthusiasmBy Max MoreDespite their protestations to the contrary, Brown and Duguid's book comes across primarily as a critical rather than constructive commentary. Not that this is a bad thing. Powerful criticism of warped thinking and its implementation in strategy and business

processes can be highly valuable. The usefulness of this book's criticism of "info-enthusiasts" would have been heightened had the authors presented a clear, actionable framework for implementing their thoughts, but this is frustratingly lacking. Early on the authors target Alvin Toffler as a prime representative of those who see everything through the lens of information. This lens produces a tunnel vision that shuts out social practices and other aspects of life that the authors insist cannot be reduced to information. Toffler provides an ideal target, explicitly presenting his "6-D vision" of demassification, decentralization, denationalization, despacialization, disintermediation, and disaggregation. These six forces, according to Toffler, have been unleashed by information technology, and will break down society into its basic constituents of individuals and information. Whether or not the authors are overly harsh on Toffler, their book does a superb job of showing the shortcomings of an entirely infocentric view. In eight chapters, Brown and Duguid explore the limits to information and to the reductive focus on it, the limitations of software agents or "bots", the mistakes in thinking that information technology means the end of the traditional location-based workplace, the dangers of re-engineering around information processes without considering social practices and communities, and the limitations of info-centric thinking about learning, organizational innovation and knowledge management, and education. All of this is well worth reading and paying close attention to. Yet this reviewer got the feeling that the authors often set up straw men to more easily make their points such as taking the most extreme statements of information technologists and futurists then presenting them as universal views among those groups. In some places they weave their arguments out of flimsy material that makes for a good story rather than for solid evidence. For example, they tell the story of how the scent of vinegar on old paper revealed information not contained in the words themselves. The point is well made, but the reader is left wondering how broadly this applies and why the authors do not mention information technology that at least attempts to achieve similar results (such as versioning, and meta-commentary Web tags). Some of the shortcomings of the info-centric view may also result from the immaturity of the technology. Certainly the authors have strong points about the value of physical proximity, though many workers are already finding technologies that allow remote work, and as broadband and eventually virtual reality become pervasive, more of the social cues currently missing may return to our tech-mediated interactions. Overall, this is an important book that identifies a real problem in thinking. In an infotech-saturated world, the authors may be forgiven for going too far in the other direction.

To see the future we can build with information technology, we must look beyond mere information to the social context that creates and gives meaning to it. For years, pundits have predicted that information technology will obliterate the need for almost everything from travel to supermarkets to business organizations to social life itself. Individual users, however, tend to be more sceptical. Beaten down by info-glut and exasperated by computer systems fraught with software crashes, viruses, and unintelligible error messages, they find it hard to get a fix on the true potential of the digital revolution. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid help us to see through frenzied visions of the future to the real forces for change in society. They argue that the gap between digerati hype and end-user gloom is largely due to the 'tunnel vision' that information-driven technologies breed. We've become so focused on where we think we ought to be a place where technology empowers individuals and obliterates social organization that we often fail to see where we're really going and what's helping us get there. We need, they argue, to look beyond our obsession with information and individuals to include the critical social networks of which these are always a part. Drawing from rich learning experiences at Xerox PARC, from examples such as IBM, Chiat/Day Advertising, and California's 'Virtual University', and from historical, social, and cultural research, the authors sharply challenge the futurists' sweeping predictions. They explain how many of the tools, jobs, and organizations seemingly targeted for future extinction in fact provide useful social resources that people will fight to keep. Rather than aiming technological bullets at these 'relics', we should instead look for ways that the new world of bits can learn from and complement them. Arguing elegantly for the important role that human sociability plays, even perhaps especially in the world of bits, *The Social Life of Information* gives us an optimistic look beyond the simplicities of information and individuals. It shows how a better understanding of the contribution that communities, organizations, and institutions make to learning, working and innovating can lead to the richest possible use of technology in our work and everyday lives.

.com How many times has your PC crashed today? While Gordon Moore's now famous law projecting the doubling of computer power every 18 months has more than borne itself out, it's too bad that a similar trajectory projecting the reliability and usefulness of all that power didn't come to pass, as well. Advances in information technology are most often measured in the cool numbers of megahertz, throughput, and bandwidth--but, for many us, the experience of these advances may be better measured in hours of frustration. The gap between the hype of the Information Age and its reality is often wide and deep, and it's into this gap that John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid plunge. Not that these guys are Luddites--far from it. Brown, the chief scientist at Xerox and the director of its Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), and Duguid, a historian and social theorist who also works with PARC, measure how information technology interacts and meshes with the social fabric. They write, "Technology design often takes aim at the surface of life. There it undoubtedly scores lots of worthwhile hits. But such successes can make designers blind to the difficulty of

more serious challenges--primarily the resourcefulness that helps embed certain ways of doing things deep in our lives." The authors cast their gaze on the many trends and ideas proffered by infoenthusiasts over the years, such as software agents, "still a long way from the predicted insertion into the woof and warp of ordinary life"; the electronic cottage that Alvin Toffler wrote about 20 years ago and has yet to be fully realized; and the rise of knowledge management and the challenges it faces trying to manage how people actually work and learn in the workplace. Their aim is not to pass judgment but to help remedy the tunnel vision that prevents technologists from seeing larger the social context that their ideas must ultimately inhabit. The Social Life of Information is a thoughtful and challenging read that belongs on the bookshelf of anyone trying to invent or make sense of the new world of information. --Harry C. Edwards

From Publishers Weekly

From the chief scientist of Xerox Corporation and a research specialist in cultural studies at UC-Berkeley comes a treatise that casts a critical eye at all the hype surrounding the boom of the information age. The authors' central complaint is that narrowly focusing on new ways to provide information will not create the cyber-revolution so many technology designers have visualized. The problem (or joy) is that information acquires meaning only through social context. Brown and Duguid add a humanist spin to this idea by arguing, for example, that "trust" is a deep social relation among people and cannot be reduced to logic, and that a satisfying "conversation" cannot be held in an Internet chat room because too much social context is stripped away and cannot be replaced by just adding more information, such as pictures and biographies of the participants. From this standpoint, Brown and Duguid contemplate the future of digital agents, the home office, the paperless society, the virtual firm and the online university. Though they offer many insightful opinions, they have not produced an easy read. As they point out, theirs is "more a book of questions than answers" and they often reject "linear thinking." Like most futurists, they are fond of long neologisms, but they are given to particularly unpronounceable ones like "infoprefixification" (the tendency to put "info" in front of words). The result is an intellectual gem in which the authors have polished some facets and, annoyingly, left others uncut. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. In his 1996 book *The Road Ahead*, Bill Gates invited business executives to take a ride with him into the gee-whiz techno-future. In the photo on the cover of his book, Gates stands on a two-lane road reminiscent of Route 66, which disappears into a clear, crisp horizon. Except for Gates and the road, there is nothing around. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid would decline the offer of a lift on this road. In their new book, *The Social Life of Information*, they say they prefer to slowly and steadily explore the road's surrounding terrain. They'd make a stop here and there to check out a tourist trap or converse with the locals at a dusty cafe. As they note, "The way forward is paradoxically not to look ahead but to look around." They're concerned with the "practice" of knowledge rather than the "process" of information, making them more akin to information archeologists than information technologists. To them, looking around means considering the context of information rather than simply its content. Marshall McLuhan argued much the same in the 1960s when he proclaimed that the medium (context) was really the message (content). The authors' different specialties make them interesting tour guides. Brown is chief scientist at Xerox and director of its Palo Alto Research Center. Duguid is a history professor at the University of California at Berkeley and a social theorist affiliated with PARC. They see the modern world cluttered with institutions, media and structures that futurologists and technopromoters predicted would be extinct by now: the paperless office, the home office, the smaller entrepreneurial firms, to name a few in their long list. The rise of the information age has likewise brought about a good deal of "endisms," among them the end of: the press, television and mass media; brokers and other infomediaries; firms, bureaucracies and universities; government, cities, regions and nation states.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF INFORMATION

One reason futurist predictions have been off target, according to Brown and Duguid, is the mythology that envelops information. As they note, this mythology "overpower[s] richer explanations" of the consequences of information and blinds us to the forces behind technological change. Information mythology is the fuel for "infoenthusiasts" and futurists. This group, according to the authors, rages "against the illogic of humankind and the primitive preferences that lead it astray" while they "continue to tell us where we ought to go." By "taking more account of people and a little less of information, they might instead tell us where we are going." The authors suggest it's one thing to argue that many of our old structures will not survive the onslaught of the new information economy, but it's another to argue that we don't need them in the new economy. The most relevant chapter for the business world is "Practice Makes Process," which relates information mythology to the early 1990s re-engineering management fad. According to Brown and Duguid, re-engineering was based on the information-friendly process view of an organization rather than a contextual, social practice view. Information - without the context of a social life - fits well into process but has trouble when put into practice. The authors' examples of how knowledge and learning is created informally in corporations (particularly Julian Orr's research at Xerox) merit the price of admission. Readers learn that collaboration, narration and improvisation are important (yet relatively hidden) methods that result in information that becomes corporate knowledge. The university system is another key area where information mythology exists. Many people have predicted that virtual universities would replace brick-and-mortar institutions. This has not happened because universities do far more than deliver information to passive learners. But the problems that information mythology has caused are minor compared with the ones that loom in the future as information becomes a more ubiquitous part of the Internet's "DNA infrastructure." The gap continues to narrow between smart "bots" and humans, with bots increasingly taking on human names like

"personal assistants" and "agents." At the same time, human activities like "brokering" and "negotiating" sound robotic. These agents perform "collaborative filtering," the familiar product-brokering activity: They match past activity with product suggestions. While the agents are supposed to represent buyers, they often act as double agents and represent sellers, too. For example, recall the publisher-paid endorsements on .com or how American Airlines' Sabre reservation system was revealed to be weighted toward American. It's increasingly difficult to determine whose interests agents represent. As Brown and Duguid note, "We might be able to use agents, but how many are able to understand their biases among the complex mathematics of dynamic preference matching?" Confusion between knowledge and information underlies many of the problems information mythology causes. As Brown and Duguid note, knowledge entails a "knower," but people treat information as independent and self-sufficient. It sounds right to ask "Where is information?" but not right to ask "Where is knowledge?" The authors argue it's difficult to separate knowledge from information: It can't be picked up, passed around, found or compared.

THE PROFESSIONAL DEBUNKER While Brown and Duguid make a compelling argument against information mythology, they can also be placed in a growing category of "information age debunkers." Witness books like Lawrence Lessig's *Code*, Douglas Rushkoff's *Coercion*, John Willinsky's *Technologies of Knowing*, David Shenks' *Data Smog* and Clifford Stoll's *Silicon Snake Oil*. Certainly the past few years have seen an abundance of "cyber-snake oil" promotion. In this sense, the information debunkers' criticisms give a welcome breath of fresh air. Yet one can argue criticism of information mythology often goes too far in promoting its own cause. For example, while Web-based universities aren't exactly all they're cracked up to be, neither is brick-and-mortar academia, which Brown and Duguid idealize. For proof, look at the growing connection between universities and business. A recent story in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "The Kept University," describes how corporations are providing more and more of the money that supports academic research - especially at Duguid's UC Berkeley. And the bare "content" of information is not always a bad thing. The subliminal context that surrounds brands - slick advertising images and packaging - often obscures the mediocre "content," the product itself. Information wrapped in context is a "hidden persuader" - the backbone of America's consumer culture - rather than the friendly communities of "practice" Brown and Duguid suggest. Despite these minor criticisms, *The Social Life of Information* is an important book. Unlike many other "information age debunkers," Brown and Duguid wisely stand back from prescription. "We do not have solutions to offer," they note at the end. "We only know that solutions will be much harder to find if we drive at the problems with tunnel vision" and if "peripheries and margins, practices and communities, organizations and institutions are left out or swept out of consideration." The authors face a formidable opponent in an age more entranced with information-based answers than context-based questions. If you have a problem, they note, redefine it in terms of information and you have an answer. "It allows people to slip quickly from questions to answers," they write. This brings us back to Bill Gates on the cover of *The Road Ahead*. Microsoft plays it both ways: It asks a question and simultaneously proffers an answer. Its advertisements ask "Where do you want to go today?" The images in these ads, however, are of people sitting eagerly at computers. The subtle suggestion is that digital information is enough. In a world of ready-made answers, it's refreshing that authors like Brown and Duguid are instead asking the important questions. John Fraim is president of the GreatHouse, a publisher and consulting firm in Santa Rosa, Calif. -- From *The Industry Standard*