

Review of *The Social Life of Information* by John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid¹

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How different will tomorrow be from today? And how easy is it to predict this sort of thing? Any number of high-tech visionaries talk about how technology will bring about the end of most common tools and even societal structures (e.g television, the media, the university, government, cities) as we currently know them. For example, why, in the early 21st century, are people still using pencils when the New York Times was predicting in the 1930's that the typewriter would replace them? Simply, because people find pencils useful. In this book, through a series of eight interconnected essays, Brown and Duguid argue that to see the future, one should not look ahead, but rather "look around".

The Social Life of Information is not intended as a "speed-bump on the information superhighway". The central point that the authors stress is that technology may change the way things are accomplished, but information must always be exchanged in a social context. For example, a new phenomena made possible by the web is "bots", or "autonomous agents". Shopping bots are given instructions to find the lowest price on a particular item, then they search the web looking for "hits" and prices on that particular item. The recent ad campaign featuring "My Simon" is an example of a shopping bot. Sites such as Amazon.com use another type of bot, not necessarily related to price. What these bots do is come up with suggestions for other books or other products that individual consumers might like based upon books they have bought in the past. In this way, bots are conceived of as providing the same level of customization and personal service that one might expect from a neighborhood bookstore. However, the authors object to this view of bots because it does not take into consideration externalities such as the social fabric, but rather treats all negotiating as a matter of matching supply and demand. Thus, the authors conclude that bots will require a greater understanding of social negotiation to be truly useful.

As a person who has used bots in shopping, I have personally found them to be somewhat useful. Rather than having to search a number of sites individually, a bot can provide links and prices within a few minutes. This type of service will show even greater improvement as the Web converts from an HTML (hyper-text markup language) to an XML (extended markup language) configuration. Why? Because rather than coding instructions as they appear graphically, web designers will be able to make information on things like price more easily accessible.

Another of the more intriguing essays concerns the future configuration of universities. The authors again believe that the hype is far, far ahead of the reality. For example, IBM has an advertisement where an elderly man in Italy strolls with his granddaughter telling her how he just finished his dissertation through Indiana University in America. How was this possible? Simply, by IBM digitizing the IU library and providing the information free over the web.

When do the authors see this scenario taking place? Probably never. The problem, as they see it, is in the approach that IBM takes to universities. What exactly is it that universities do? If the answer is provide otherwise inaccessible information to relatively passive learners, then the IBM ad is a fair representation of the job universities are doing. However, the authors contend that again, the information available from a university takes place in a social context. The authors view universities fundamentally as places which dispense degrees. Of course, universities do far more than this, but awarding degrees, or "credentialing" is one of the more obvious things that universities do. This is one of the reasons why a degree from Harvard University has more value in the marketplace than a degree from Cleveland State University (although Cleveland State has the better basketball team).

The authors view one of the most important roles of universities to be "enculturation", which means that universities put students in contact with different communities of thought. As a student progresses through their undergraduate major, they come in increasingly close and detailed contact with successful practitioners of their major - they "learn to be" like others in their chosen field. This is one of the reasons that internships and peer relationships in college can be so rewarding. In addition, the authors cite research that compares students with equivalent degrees obtained either "on-site" or through distance learning. Students who complete their degrees in isolation view them as less valuable, and so do employers. This is what the researchers refer to as the "nonequivalence of equivalence diplomas".

Although I have only discussed two of the topics that the authors approach, I hope I have given potential readers a flavor of the book's context. As both a professor and the owner of a small business, I found the book to be full of valuable insights into the problems that can and cannot be solved through information technology. As a potential warning, I should note that several of the essays deal almost exclusively with management and training issues. This reflects the interests and backgrounds of the authors (Brown is the Chief Scientist at Xerox and Director of Xerox PARC; Duguid is a historian at UC-Berkeley).

Overall, the book makes a valuable contribution to the current discussion on the role of technology in our social institutions, and perhaps more importantly, the changes technology will bring to those institutions. A very thought-provoking read.

¹ Brown, J. S., and Duguid, P. (2000). *The Social Life of Information*. MA: Harvard Business School Press. (ISBN: 0875847625).

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