The Social Life of Information [Review]

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Description

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Brown, Seely, and Dugid, *The Social Life of Information*

A Review

*Cambridge: Harvard Business School, 2000*

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University Librarian, Pacific University

The chief scientist at Xerox (Brown) teams up with a social theorist (Duguid) to take a critical look at the wonder of today’s technology as it relates to humanity. The authors clearly enjoy bringing more questions than answers to issues surrounding the impact of technology, but look at the history thus far to draw some conclusions.

Brown and Duguid stand back from the “Gee Whiz” of technological capabilities, attempting to place technology within the context of society. They argue against the linear views of both technology disciples and alarmists as being too narrow, and point to examples of how humans continue to manipulate the development of technology rather than bowing to its capabilities. The authors certainly acknowledge, even embrace, the significant changes society has experienced in the Technology Revolution and they recognize the power of continuing change. However, sweeping predictions based on the capabilities of technology have not necessarily come to pass—a paperless society, virtual offices, all education being delivered on-line, etc. We do use electronic documents as well as paper, we do accomplish work electronically from home and other locations, and distance learning gives us another educational option, but thus far we have shown little interest, as a society, in abandoning shared cultural icons and experiences. The authors suggest then, that cultural values and complex human decision making essentially “trump” technology—that society embraces technology to the extent that it finds it valuable and enhancing, but largely ignores technology when it does not mesh with human needs and interests, i.e. comfort, creativity, personal interaction, etc. Additionally, the book cautions us against mistaking information for knowledge. In the information technology era, vast amounts of information are at our disposal, but information, however it is accessed, has little value until it is assimilated as knowledge.
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