

The Social Life of Information

John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid
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In the increasingly polarized discussion about the social impact of information technology, and related issues such as online learning and the use of learning technologies, it is refreshing to read a book that provides a dispassionate but informed view of the digital revolution. While the opposing camps of techno-utopics and neo-Luddites have been busy lobbing rhetorical grenades at each other, little has been done to elevate the discussion to a level that helps us gain a deeper understanding of the issues. Although Brown and Duguid prick holes in the techno-utopic balloon, they do so with constructive intentions that recognize that information technology does have a valuable role to play in many dimensions of our lives.

The central thesis of their book is that we have become so narrowly focused on the future and where information technology will supposedly take us that we have ignored the social context that gives meaning to information and our use of the associated technologies. Brown and Duguid use the metaphor of being driven by someone with tunnel vision to illustrate what they think is wrong with our current narrow preoccupation with information that is devoid of social context. The driver with tunnel vision may have a clear vision of what lies ahead, but he or she misses what is happening on the periphery, and this may have a significant impact on the journey. For the passengers the journey can be quite uncomfortable, as they see everything the driver has narrowly missed, like the toes of pedestrians, the sides of other cars, and the hands and ankles of cyclists.

In the context of information technology, they argue that this tunnel vision “inevitably pushes aside all the fuzzy stuff that lies around the edges—context, background, history, common knowledge, social resources ... [which] ... provides valuable balance and perspective ... provides alternatives, offers breadth of vision, and indicates choices” (pp. 1-2). They call this “tunnel design,” which views information as the answer to all our problems and deals with information problems by simply providing more information. The real answer, they argue, is to look to the social periphery, to the communities, organizations, and institutions that define human activities. “Attending too closely to information overlooks the social context that helps people understand what that information might mean and why it matters” (p. 5).

In the eight chapters that make up the book Brown and Duguid address the social context of information from a variety of perspectives. Chapter 1 challenges “the myth of

information” and the view that our problems will be solved with more information. Chapter 2 discusses the limits of “bots” and other software agents that rely on decontextualized information. They warn us to pay attention to the difference between information processing agents and human agency. Chapter 3 examines the idea that information technology will reverse the massification brought about by the technology of the industrial revolution. Chapter 4 looks at management theory and business reengineering and argues in favor of practice-driven rather than process-driven change, because practice acknowledges the value of context, community, and informal learning, the things that occur on the social periphery. Chapter 5 examines knowledge and learning in relation to practice as distinct from information. They distinguish between knowledge and information and between learning about and learning to be and make a case for the importance of social learning. This is one of three chapters that will be of particular relevance to distance educators (the others are chapters 7 and 8). They suggest that although new Internet technologies help strengthen global networking, there are clear advantages to working face to face for in order to facilitate “implicit communication, negotiation, and collective improvisation” (p. 146). The most powerful uses of the technologies may be in supporting these face-to-face meetings.

Chapter 6 discusses innovation in organizations and the value of adopting an ecological view of knowledge. Chapter 7 is the second chapter that should be of interest to distance educators. It focuses on the importance of document design, the value of fixity as opposed to fluidity of information arguing that the fixity of print frames information, and provides context by telling people “how to read, where to read, what it means, what it’s worth, and why it matters” (p. 201). The book concludes with one more chapter that should interest distance educators. Chapter 8 takes a look at the emergence of the virtual university and new forms of educational organization. And once again, the central theme of the book is clear as the authors argue that all the hype surrounding new educational organizations will not amount to much unless we “look beyond the simplicities of information and individuals to the complexities of learning, knowledge, judgment, communities, organizations, and institutions” (p. 213).

The *Social Life of Information* is a thought-provoking and balanced examination of the impact of information technologies on the way we work, teach, learn, innovate, and organize our institutions.

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