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The Social Life of Information (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Melinda Knight, Editor
University of Rochester

The Social Life of Information

By John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000. 320 pages.

Reviewed by Clive Muir

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Lately, I have been indulging in the word "information," noting its contrived conjugations (infomate, infomedia, infomercial, informatics) and its prodigious pairings (information highway, information systems, information technology, information broker). Such nomenclatures designate information as an object to be transcribed, traded, and transmitted, with the help of state-of-the-art vehicles and busy information workers. Many organizations have been constructing information stations (a.k.a. computer clusters) to ensure their places at the "revolution." We, as business and managerial communication instructors and trainers, are concerned about how this trend affects our profession. How much should we focus on the new technologies of the workplace in our classes? Would this be at the expense of traditional curricular offerings? Thus, I was pleased to read, in *The Social Life of Information* by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, that information is more than bits, modems, and keystrokes. In fact, this well-written volume, covering nine chapters, teaches us how and why information has a life consisting of networks that are more interpersonal than interterminal.

Brown and Duguid's book, which opens with the "advance praise" of 14 leaders from major corporations, foundations, think tanks, and universities, critiques the frenzied focus on acquiring more information and its parallel explosion of new technologies as solutions to human challenges. Unfortunately, such remedies often exacerbate community and organizational problems because the "social periphery" is usually overlooked in the "design stylebooks of the information age" (p. 5). Although we have been led to believe that electronic commerce and the Internet will hasten the information democracy, the authors help us to understand how information shapes and is shaped among people interacting with one another and among workers who learn by doing rather than from "systems." The authors then suggest, somewhat redundantly, that only people determine the value of information and how it should be treated.

The first three chapters examine the impact of technology on our lives. In Chapter 1, "Limits to Information," the authors explain that they are not information-bashing Luddites getting "foolishly romantic about simpler

times." Rather, they acknowledge the progress of everyday life that can be attributed to new technologies. What they seem to care about is that we are "drowning and [don't] know it" as "information technology tunnels deeper and deeper" to produce "the next quadrillion packet or the next megaflop of processing power" (p. 15). They discuss the foolish notion of "endism," where proponents of new technologies promise the demise of government, nations, universities, cities, mass media, office paper, and other entities as we know them. Such linear thinking ("logic of information"), which has resulted in predictions about the flattening of organizations and the creation of a more egalitarian workplace whose members readily share knowledge and authority, undermines the import of social networks and interpersonal relations "logic of humanity" in the workplace.

Chapter 2 introduces us to software "agents" (chatterbots and knobots), programs designed to simulate human behaviors and interactions and sift the growing mass of data in cyberspace. These agents can manage property and investments, monitor shopping and surfing characteristics, and send information to prospective clients and customers. Again, because these "agents" lack the capability to discern the complex processes that humans use to make decisions, they end up being an annoyance to many Internet users. Furthermore, questions arise over the control of and responsibility for information decisions made by these agents.

One of the popular predictions about the information revolution is the massive shift to home-based employment, away from the "massification" brought about by the industrial revolution. In the third chapter, "Home Alone," the authors assert that office work has been narrowly construed as information work, so that with the right automation tools people can work from their bedrooms. The problem is that office work also takes place in a social sphere, like other places where people gather and engage in a variety of interpersonal activities. To complicate matters, the technology is never quite reliable, so home workers often spend more time calling their offices for help and support. For example, the difficulty one experiences when downloading a file at home is different from doing it at the office, due to readily available informal troubleshooting help provided by coworkers.

To better understand the human side of information, we must examine how people learn things and how organizations become "knowledgeable." The discussions in Chapters 4 through 7 are relevant to those organizations that latch onto management fads (quality, reengineering, knowledge management) by investing in expensive electronic systems "into which people are then inserted" (p. 98). Informed practice, or the activities involved in getting work done, evolve out of workers making sense of what they do (see Weick, 1979) and their interactions and relationships with other employees. Where official systems and procedures reflect a company's overall mission, employees improvise the immediate

practicalities of the job. Thus, the notion that learning is simply a matter of acquiring and absorbing information must be rejected.

That is exactly the problem with a related fad, knowledge management. I have to confess that I had been enamored of the concept and had emphasized it in my business communication curriculum. Brown and Duguid argue that knowledge management might as well be an oxymoron, since circulating human knowledge is not merely search and retrieval: "The same stream of information directed at different people doesn't produce the same knowledge in each [because] practice shapes assimilation" (p. 129). Knowledge lies with the knower, the employee, and not in the database of the organization. When employees leave an organization, the knowledge is not left behind, but new knowledge has to be constructed. The employees create, envisage, assimilate, understand, and execute adventurous business plans and ways of staying ahead of the competition. Knowledge management is a difficult course because it assumes that you can detach knowledge from people in the same way that "best practices" can be transported to other organizations.

The authors examine the futile predictions about the demise of office paper in favor of online and other electronic communications (Chapter 7) to illustrate their thesis. In fact, as the demand for electronic office systems has skyrocketed, so has the need for paper-using equipment (copiers, faxes, printers) and even the non-electronic paper (Post-It!). They engage in a parallel debate about the social life of paper, commenting on "the remarkable resourcefulness of paper documents" (p. 178). Like people, paper (or paperless communication) provokes questions of validity, legality, and permanence. Newspaper publishers remain curious and hopeful about the profitability of websites, but even the online magazine *Slate*—owned by the leader of the world of computer technology, Microsoft, and edited by a well-known and respected media personality, Michael Kinsley—had to resort to a paper edition when its future looked dim.

Ultimately, we have to reorient ourselves to the place and purpose of information and to our technological futures (Chapters 8 and 9). Universities, concerned about their survival, have been redefining themselves in the name of technology. Some have become worldwide virtual information centers and others have put their libraries online. A university in New Jersey now requires that all its students take at least one course via distance learning. What is the message they send to their students? The classroom doesn't matter as long as you have a modem and a screen. The authors caution, again, in case we think that only corporations are guilty of riding the information bandwagon, that this trend towards "infoconsumption" underestimates the benefits of rubbing shoulders with fellow students, wandering through the stacks of a library, and attending campus events. They mention studies that found students who take courses in isolation often perform well on their tests but find the cre-

dentials they receive to be less valuable than their counterparts who studied in conventional classrooms. Thus, in spite of the rhetoric of "infothusiasts," suggesting that boundaries do not matter, we have to acknowledge the people who make up the firms, networks, and institutions before we begin innovating around them.

For those ABC members who have engaged in online debates about how the use of technology is dictating our curricula, this book should provide new insights. At first, the book will seem disorganized, especially after the first three chapters where the authors begin to discuss "learning" (a refresher course in organizational behavior). I like the very humanistic yet pragmatic approach. There are no Orwellian predictions about a coming "technopoly" à la Postman (1992); rather, they encourage us to study carefully how we teach and why we automate. As many of us have felt the need (pressure) to make all our presentations PowerPoint friendly or have wondered how much time we should spend teaching in computer classrooms, Brown and Duguid help us put things in perspective: All the technology available can only transport the data, but it's up to us to make it come alive as information.

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