Book Review

Norming the Information Society


Alistair Duff, Professor of Information Policy in the Centre for Social Informatics at Edinburgh Napier University, is well-known as an informed and insightful commentator on information society issues. This recent book, in Routledge’s Research in Information Technology and Society series, offers an original slant on the topic.

The existential crisis of the information society, he tells us, is over; we all agree that there is one, and we pretty much agree what it is. Now, however, we have a normative crisis: How should an information conduct itself, and what should be its norms of behavior? What norms—socially agreed codes of conduct that prescribe or proscribe behavior—should operate in the new information environment? If we have agreement on this, then we will be able to devise rational and effective information policies, which Duff is not alone in finding sadly lacking at present (e.g., Epstein, Nisbet, & Gillespie, 2011; Orna, 2008).

This book is an attempt to point the way toward an ethical information policy, in the very broadest sense, affecting all the information issues in current society. It is set within the academic area of information society studies, but draws from political and social philosophy rather than anything more technical, and sets its face against the idea that since the technical issues are new, so must be the social and policy solutions. Its commendably ambitious remit is to be “an attempt to work out the principles that can sustain a robust moral vision of an open and reasonably egalitarian information age” (p. 20).

To achieve this, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what we mean by information: self-evidently, the foundation of any understanding of the information society, and “what our world runs on: the blood and the fuel, the vital principle” (Gleick, 2011, p. 9).

Duff chooses what he calls a “journalistic” conception of information, one rooted in ordinary language rather than any objective, Shannon-like conception: Information here is social, semantic, factual, and valuable. This plain-language approach might be seen to disadvantage the analysis which follows, compared with the more formal analyses such as that of Floridi (2010), but it is well-suited to the approach taken here.

To develop his normative theory, Duff turns to what some might feel an unfashionable, even old-fashioned, source: “the normative tradition of social democracy, and specifically an ethical Anglo-American version of such” (p. 26). He cites a variety of authors in support of the idea that the classic texts of liberal Western political theory may be a valid basis for developing a theory of information society. Indeed, the wide range of literature mentioned is one of the strengths of what is, for a philosophically included tome, quite a short book. It therefore seems unkind to quibble, but it is perhaps surprising that there is no mention of Jesse Shera, Margaret Egan, and social epistemology. This may be understandable on the basis that the social epistemologists gave us little in the way of practical guidance on information society issues, but as the only library/information people to merit a write-up in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, one might have thought they merited a name check. Nor is there much mention of Floridi, although—to be fair to the author—Floridi’s most relevant writings have appeared only after this book had been completed. Karl Popper gets a bit part, with his Open Society and Its Enemies providing a well-known source of support for certain information society perspectives. Duff concludes that despite the undoubted relevance of his views, Popper left rather confusingly mixed messages and “too much sheer inconsistency” (p. 122); an interesting echo of a point often made about Popper’s views on information and knowledge.

More specifically, within the social democratic tradition and occupying the greater part of the book, Duff turns for inspiration to R.H. Tawney (1880–1962), the British social thinker of the early 20th century, and John Rawls (1921–2002), the American social philosopher of slightly later vintage. He acknowledges that their views, which might be caricatured not too cruelly as poor, but honest, workers being emancipated by upper class intellectuals such as themselves, are commonly thought nowadays to be patronizing at best and, at worst, entirely irrelevant to present conditions.

Duff argues to the contrary that the principles espoused by Rawls, Tawney, and those who thought like them are still of relevance. On this foundation, he generates two “principles of information justice,” a “prescriptive formula for the social distribution of information, with information defined by the journalistic conception” (pp. 62–63):

Each person has the same indefeasible claim to all information essential for the exercise of a fully adequate scheme of equal civil and political liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all.
Inequalities in the social distribution of categories of information required for social and economic functioning are to satisfy three conditions: they are to be attached to an information infrastructure equally accessible to all (equal opportunity clause); they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantages members of society (the difference principle); they should not be so extensive as to generate class distinctions (the Tawney proviso). (p. **) There follows a working out, albeit not in very great detail, of what this means in practical terms. Duff is not afraid to use the arguably out-of-fashion language of social engineering to achieve social democracy. Those in the library/information area will note with pleasure that he counts the public library as among the axial institutions of information justice.

This book is perhaps seen as a useful follow-up to the author’s Information Society Studies (Duff, 2000) reader, building on ideas of the thinkers presented there. Students will probably find it beneficial to first work through the reader-friendly and student-oriented introductions given by Feather (2013) or Cornelius (2010). Those with a particular taste for philosophical ethics will wish to compare it with Floridi’s (2013) recent offering on information ethics. The particular strength of Duff’s book is its demonstration of how long-established principles may be given a new lease on life in new information contexts. It puts its case fluently and convincingly, in relatively few pages. It deserves to be read by anyone with a serious interest in information society issues, within the library/information sciences certainly, and hopefully beyond them.

References


David Bawden
Centre for Information Science
City University London
Northampton Square, London
EC1V 0HB,
United Kingdom
E-mail: db@soi.city.ac.uk
Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com).
DOI: 10.1002/asi.23297
**AUTHOR QUERY FORM**

Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for publication, the questions listed below have arisen. Please attend to these matters and return this form with your proof.

Many thanks for your assistance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Query References</th>
<th>Query</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>AUTHOR: Please provide price and paperback, hardcover, etc. if available.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>AUTHOR: Please add a complete entry in the References for this book.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>AUTHOR: Were the quotes here in this paragraph taken directly from the original source? Are they located on pp. 62–63? Are the following excerpts on those pages as well? If not, please list the correct page numbers at the end of the quotes both here and in the excerpts. Did the two excerpt paragraphs follow each other in the original source? If not, please list the page number for each paragraph.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>AUTHOR: See prior query.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
USING e-ANNOTATION TOOLS FOR ELECTRONIC PROOF CORRECTION

Required software to e-Annotate PDFs: Adobe Acrobat Professional or Adobe Reader (version 8.0 or above). (Note that this document uses screenshots from Adobe Reader X)
The latest version of Acrobat Reader can be downloaded for free at: [http://get.adobe.com/reader/](http://get.adobe.com/reader/)

Once you have Acrobat Reader open on your computer, click on the Comment tab at the right of the toolbar:

This will open up a panel down the right side of the document. The majority of tools you will use for annotating your proof will be in the Annotations section, pictured opposite. We’ve picked out some of these tools below:

1. **Replace (Ins) Tool** – for replacing text.
   
   Strikes a line through text and opens up a text box where replacement text can be entered.
   
   **How to use it**
   
   - Highlight a word or sentence.
   - Click on the Replace (Ins) icon in the Annotations section.
   - Type the replacement text into the blue box that appears.

2. **Strikethrough (Del) Tool** – for deleting text.
   
   Strikes a red line through text that is to be deleted.
   
   **How to use it**
   
   - Highlight a word or sentence.
   - Click on the Strikethrough (Del) icon in the Annotations section.

3. **Add note to text Tool** – for highlighting a section to be changed to bold or italic.
   
   Highlights text in yellow and opens up a text box where comments can be entered.
   
   **How to use it**
   
   - Highlight the relevant section of text.
   - Click on the Add note to text icon in the Annotations section.
   - Type instruction on what should be changed regarding the text into the yellow box that appears.

4. **Add sticky note Tool** – for making notes at specific points in the text.
   
   Marks a point in the proof where a comment needs to be highlighted.
   
   **How to use it**
   
   - Click on the Add sticky note icon in the Annotations section.
   - Click at the point in the proof where the comment should be inserted.
   - Type the comment into the yellow box that appears.
USING e-ANNOTATION TOOLS FOR ELECTRONIC PROOF CORRECTION

5. **Attach File Tool** – for inserting large amounts of text or replacement figures.

- Inserts an icon linking to the attached file in the appropriate pace in the text.

**How to use it**
- Click on the Attach File icon in the Annotations section.
- Click on the proof to where you’d like the attached file to be linked.
- Select the file to be attached from your computer or network.
- Select the colour and type of icon that will appear in the proof. Click OK.

6. **Add stamp Tool** – for approving a proof if no corrections are required.

- Inserts a selected stamp onto an appropriate place in the proof.

**How to use it**
- Click on the Add stamp icon in the Annotations section.
- Select the stamp you want to use. (The Approved stamp is usually available directly in the menu that appears).
- Click on the proof where you’d like the stamp to appear. (Where a proof is to be approved as it is, this would normally be on the first page).

7. **Drawing Markups Tools** – for drawing shapes, lines and freeform annotations on proofs and commenting on these marks.

- Allows shapes, lines and freeform annotations to be drawn on proofs and for comment to be made on these marks.

**How to use it**
- Click on one of the shapes in the Drawing Markups section.
- Click on the proof at the relevant point and draw the selected shape with the cursor.
- To add a comment to the drawn shape, move the cursor over the shape until an arrowhead appears.
- Double click on the shape and type any text in the red box that appears.

For further information on how to annotate proofs, click on the Help menu to reveal a list of further options: