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Book Review

Norming the Information Society

A Normative Theory of the Information Society. Alistair S. Duff. New York, NY: Routledge, 2012. 157 pp. ••. (••). (ISBN: 978-0-415-95571-3).

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.

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> 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 provisio). (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.

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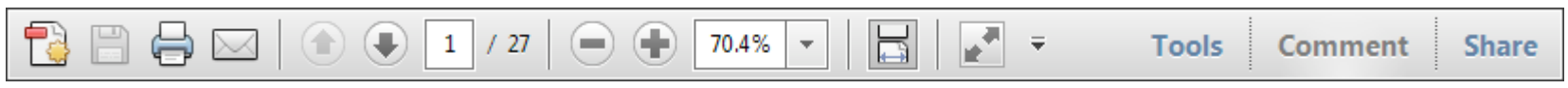

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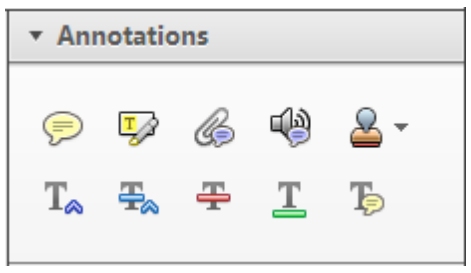

1. Replace (Ins) Tool – for replacing text.

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How to use it

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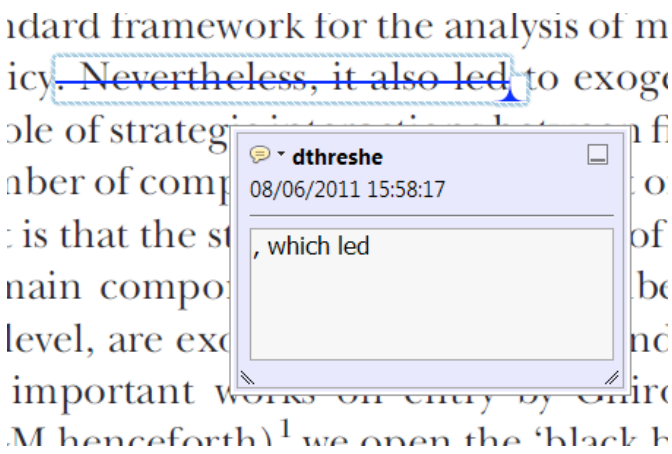
- Click on the Replace (Ins) icon in the Annotations section.
- Type the replacement text into the blue box that appears.

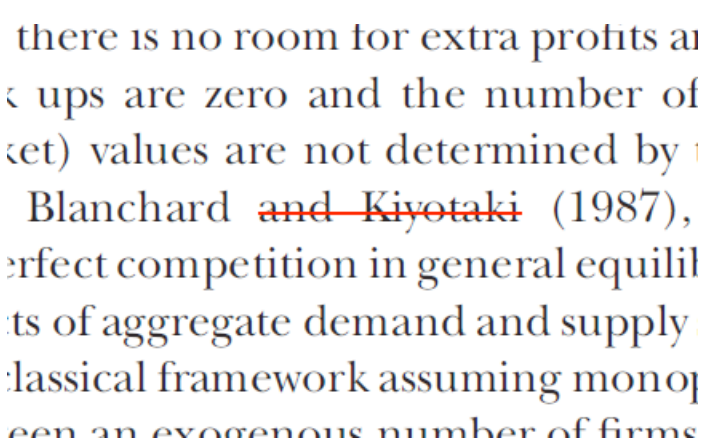


2. Strikethrough (Del) Tool – for deleting text.

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.

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- Click on the Add note to text icon in the Annotations section.
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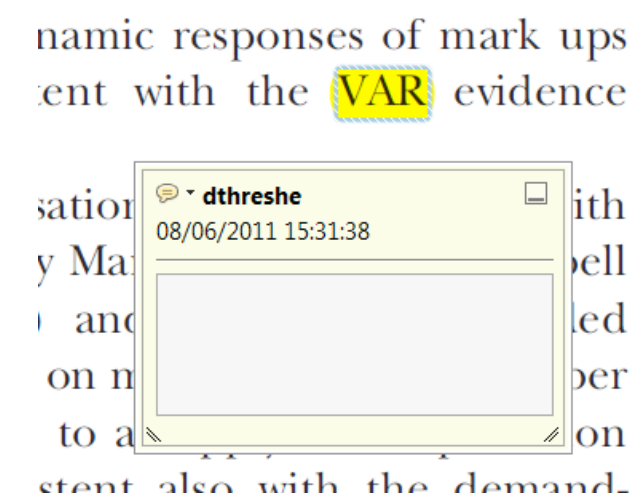

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How to use it

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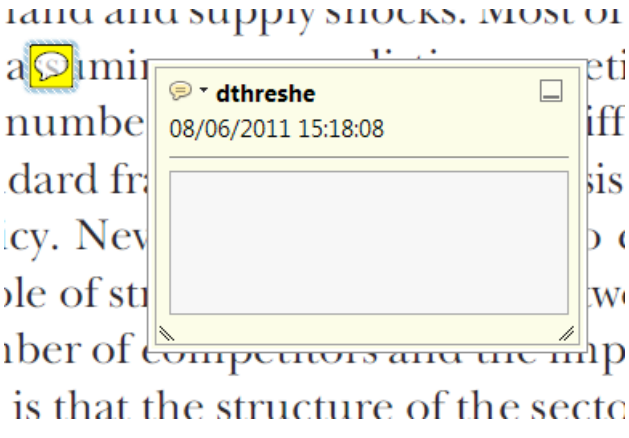
- Type the comment into the yellow box that appears.



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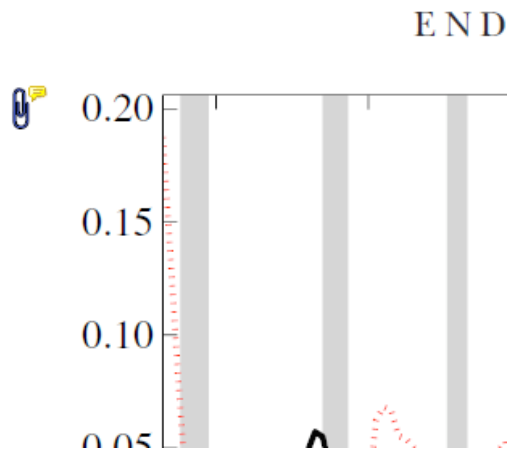

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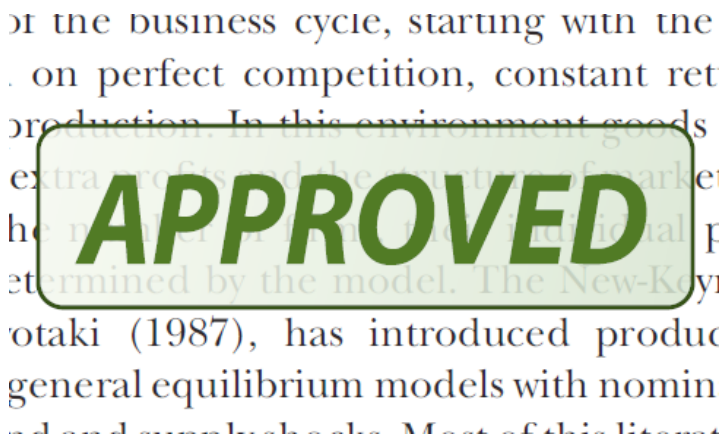

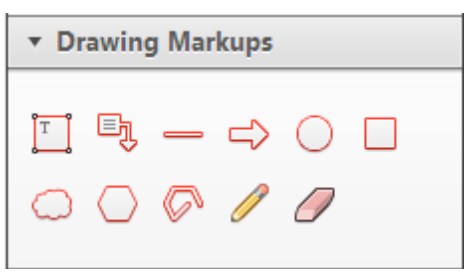

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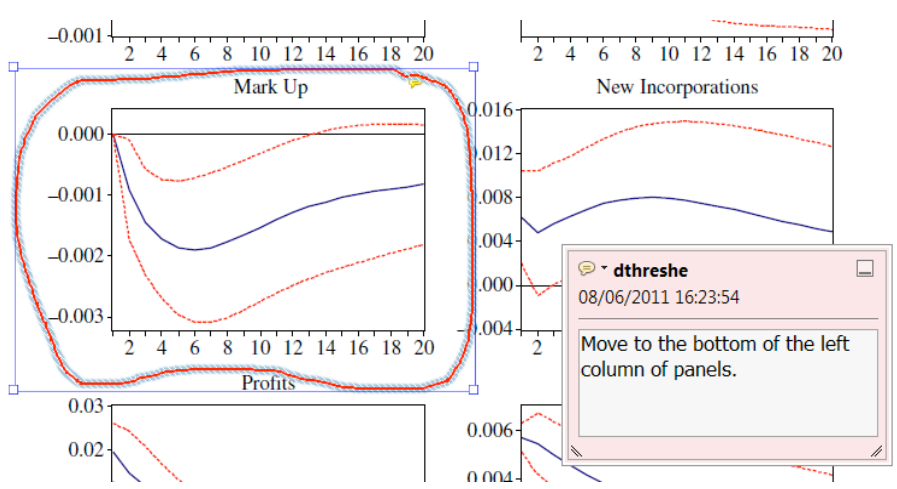
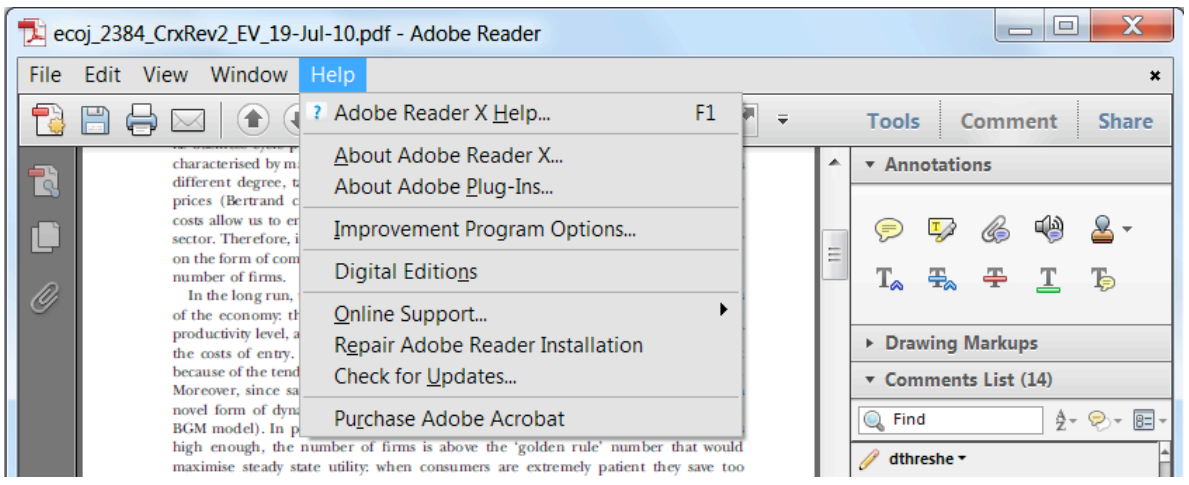
- Double click on the shape and type any text in the red box that appears.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