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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 infeasible 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.

1 Inequalities in the social distribution of categories of informa- 32  
2 tion required for social and economic functioning are to satisfy 33  
3 three conditions: they are to be attached to an information 34  
4 infrastructure equally accessible to all (equal opportunity 35  
5 clause); they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advan- 36  
6 tages members of society (the difference principle); they should 37  
7 not be so extensive as to generate class distinctions (the Tawney 38  
8 provisio). (p. ••) 39  
9

10 There follows a working out, albeit not in very great 41  
11 detail, of what this means in practical terms. Duff is not 42  
12 afraid to use the arguably out-of-fashion language of social 43  
13 engineering to achieve social democracy. Those in the 44  
14 library/information area will note with pleasure that he 45  
15 counts the public library as among the axial institutions of 46  
16 information justice. 47

17 This book is perhaps seen as a useful follow-up to the 48  
18 author's *Information Society Studies* (Duff, 2000) reader, 49  
19 building on ideas of the thinkers presented there. Students 50  
20 will probably find it beneficial to first work through the 51  
21 reader-friendly and student-oriented introductions given by 52  
22 Feather (2013) or Cornelius (2010). Those with a particular 53  
23 taste for philosophical ethics will wish to compare it with 54  
24 Floridi's (2013) recent offering on information ethics. The 55  
25 particular strength of Duff's book is its demonstration of 56  
26 how long-established principles may be given a new lease on 57  
27 life in new information contexts. It puts its case fluently and 58  
28 convincingly, in relatively few pages. It deserves to be read 59  
29 by anyone with a serious interest in information society 60  
30 issues, within the library/information sciences certainly, and 61  
31 hopefully beyond them. 62

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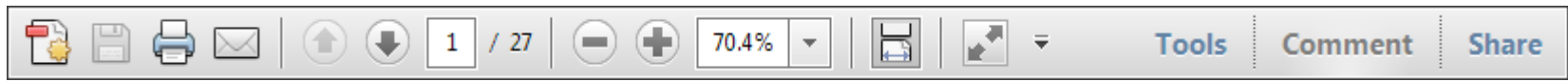
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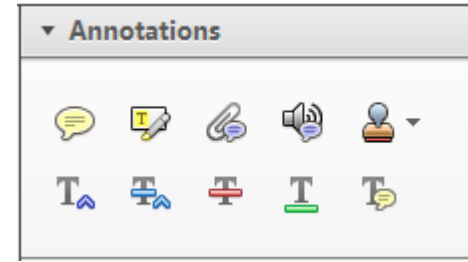
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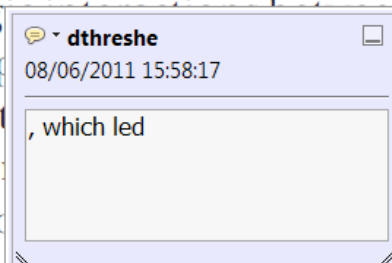


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standard framework for the analysis of microeconomics. Nevertheless, it also led to the emergence of a new paradigm of strategic behavior. The number of competitors in the industry is that the structure of the main components of the model, are exogenous. Important works on this by Shirasaka (henceforth) we open the 'black b



**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.

there is no room for extra profits and the number of competitors are zero and the number of firms (net) values are not determined by Blanchard and ~~Kiyotaki~~ (1987), perfect competition in general equilibrium. The effects of aggregate demand and supply in the classical framework assuming monopoly are an exogenous number of firms

**3. Add note to text Tool – for highlighting a section to be changed to bold or italic.**



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**How to use it**

- Highlight the relevant section of text.
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- Type instruction on what should be changed regarding the text into the yellow box that appears.

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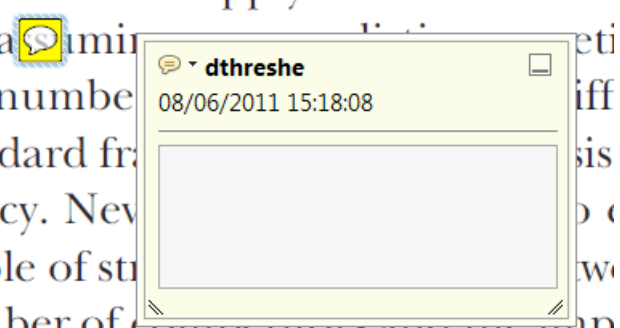


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**How to use it**

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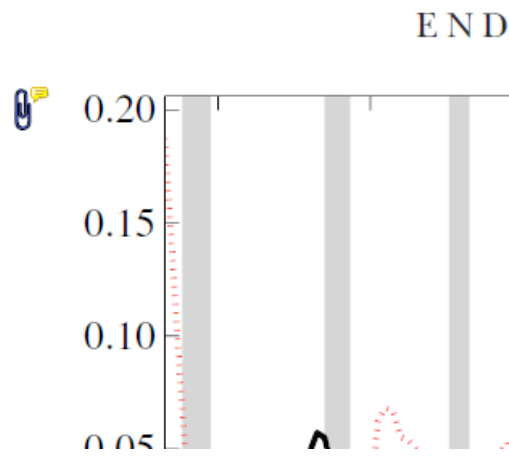
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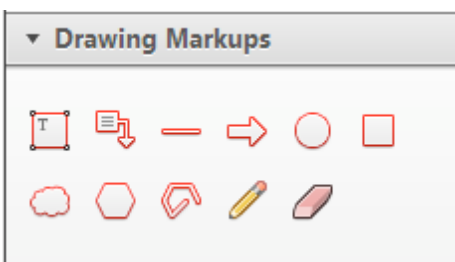
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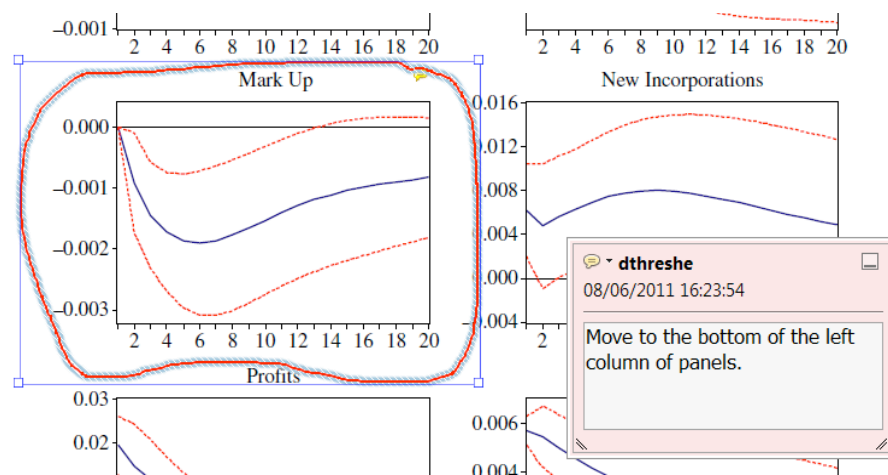


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