**The Social Life of Information**  
by John Seely Brown & Paul Duguid  

Reviewed by David W. Gill  
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This is a brilliant and critically-important book! John Seely Brown is the Chief Scientist at Xerox and Director of Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center). Paul Duguid is research specialist in Social and Cultural Studies in Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Their basic message is that a narrow, tunnel-vision obsession with information, information technologies, and individuals blinds us to the importance of social and contextual features of human existence, communication, and work.

"The idea that information and individuals are inevitably and always part of rich social networks is central to this book" (p. ix). The "blinkered euphoria of the infoenthusiast" and rampant "endism" (the confidently predicted end of the university, the nation-state, the newspaper, etc.) are given a clear-headed and sober analysis by Brown and Duguid. The "6-Ds" (demassification, decentralization, denationalization, despacialization, disintermediation, and disaggregation) are shown to be misleading or even false. Information technology is not necessarily making organizations flatter, more egalitarian, smaller, or less centralized. "Intelligent agents" are failures as substitutes for human agents in most important respects. They are complements, not substitutes.

The notion that individuals will be able to work at home alone with their technology has not been, and cannot be, a panacea. The loss of the social relations of the office context, to say nothing of technical support for balky software and equipment, is a huge, often unacknowledged cost to home workers. And in the organization itself, the focus on reengineering processes has been blind to the importance of socially-constructed work practices which make these processes possible.

A substantial chunk of *The Social Life of Information* moves into the domain of learning and education, not just in business organizations but universities. Brown and Duguid show that explicit knowledge of data and information is not all there is. Tacit knowledge, narrative, improvisation, and other features of human thinking are being overlooked in the obsession with data and explicit knowledge. Creators and leaders of distance education, virtual universities, and the like, ought to be fired if they don't read Brown and Duguid carefully before adopting plans and budgets.

Neil Postman, Theodore Roszak, David Lyon, and other social critics and intellectuals have offered many of these critical and cautionary notes on information technology for decades. What Duguid and (especially) Brown bring is the credibility and "fit" of a critique from the inside of the high tech world. Not only their business and technology experience but their broad and deep learning (evidenced in every chapter in their ideas and sources) makes this book a potential classic that deserves as wide a readership as possible. This is in no way an anti-technology diatribe. Rather it is a bold demythologization of technophilia with a proposed, re-constructed, understanding of the human and social environment which alone can realize and sustain the promise of technology.