

IS 203 Reflection Paper

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I found the first half of Capurro and Hjørland's "The Concept of Information" to be largely impenetrable. On page 14-15 (page numbers from the reader), they criticize practitioners in the field of information science for using "persuasive definitions" of their field and of the term "information" – that is, definitions that are intended to impress people outside the field in order to boost the prestige of the practitioners' field, rather than to convey meaning – but I thought that up until the section "Information in Information Science" (p.28), Capurro and Hjørland were guilty of doing the same thing. Perhaps "information" is a term that does not need a precise definition: indeed, on p. 37 Buckland is quoted as writing, "We conclude that we are unable to say confidently of anything that it could not be information." If everything is information, then how can "information" be a meaningful word? In any case, it was hard for me to see how the exposition of philosophical consequences of various definitions of "information" in the first half of the article could possibly contribute anything of practical or theoretical value.

One idea I did take away from the article is the historical shift from the idea of information

as something material that exists independently of the mind (p. 17): “objects in the world in-form the senses”, to the contemporary idea of information as an emergent phenomenon (p. 28): “Information is, in fact, the causal result of existing physical components and processes.” However, Wiener argued in contradiction to this second view, saying that “information is information, not matter or energy.” (p. 19) I find the idea of information as an emergent phenomenon to be more convincing than the idea of information as a third metaphysical principle. Given the vagueness of all possible definitions of information, I find it difficult to swallow the idea of giving it the same conceptual status as “matter” or “energy”.

With respect to McGinn’s “Why Study Science and Technology in Society?”, I found its brief allusion to unintended consequences of technology (p. 50) to be particular relevant to the study of information technology. The article’s timeline points out the transition from the post-World-War-II era, where science and technology were considered benign or beneficial, to the 1960s, when the public began to see some of the harmful, usually unintended consequences of science; for example, environmental pollution from pesticides. I have to wonder what the equivalent revelations are going to be when it comes to the unintended consequences of information technology, and when they are going to come. Information technology has perhaps been criticized based on, for example, fears of children finding information on the Internet that their parents don’t want them to see, or fears that terrorists will use the Internet to plan illegal activities and elude law enforcement. But I think that an understanding of the true unintended consequences of IT is still to come. The Internet has changed many people’s social lives by allowing them to efficiently find people to talk to

with whom they have something in common; does this make people who have access to the Internet less likely to talk to their neighbors? If so, is that a good thing? Does the diversity of news sources available on the Internet encourage people to search out news sources that only complement their own biases, and discourage critical thinking? The unintended consequences of IT mostly remain yet to be explored, but given the history of other technologies, we can assume that there will be some.