

My overall assessment after finishing the Brown and Duguid reading is that the first four chapters of *The Social Life of Information* is negative. The text appears to be littered with vague assumptions, generalizations, and a bias against media and media enthusiasts that goes unchecked by any sort of objective measure of research. The personas are fabricated from a socio-cultural space that is still in its emergence and is still inventing new genres of entrepreneurs and visionaries. The phenomena described are derived in large part from the diction of business manuals and sales pitches, while neglecting the underlying currents that continue to mould society with greater influence at each successive generation. Much of the arguments given are anecdotal, and in the nature of anecdotal research, is amenable to being skewed in whatever direction the authors decide to pursue. In short, this piece lacks substance.

For instance, from the outset of the piece, the authors claim an overflow of information that eradicates the information deficit of the past. This is absurd. We still need to make “decisions in conditions of limited or imperfect information,” and we still suffer from “chronic information shortages.” We have become more adept at deriving numbers and figures, but this denies the fact that there are still huge areas of information that remain uncharted: tactile information, holistic information, or tacit information, to name a few. By defining ‘information’ in such a limiting sense, they have skewed the playing field in their favour from the start; it seems almost immediately that the conclusions they draw will be inevitable. While there is a good argument here towards the conflicting influences of technology, the progress of technology is set against a series of the joyously optimistic voices of information’s past. Yet I am sure we have all heard the equally ridiculous voices of the pessimistic past, stating that computers will never be personal or that telephones will never replace the telegraph. The purpose of the entire book is to uncover why information has not lived up to its expectations, when, really, such expectations are as diverse as the people who make them. An equally relevant question would be to ask how modern information has managed to exceed all of our expectations and to leap beyond all of our dreams of the past.

I could go on. The second chapter’s tangent into the use of online agents derives from the assumption that we want such agents to act as people. Agents are not a replacement, and were never meant to be a replacement, for the subjective value judgements that human workers can provide. They are tools, inasmuch as a dictionary or a library, to enable information retrieval, and should be evaluated on the basis of the way they improve access to knowledge. They cannot replace a social environment; they cannot replace people. One does not require a chapter to realize this.

The third chapter, *Home Alone* - I could say something about the lack of descriptiveness in any of the titles of this book, but then I would be subject to the same subjectivity that I critique now – presupposes fundamental human desires. It defends information’s promise of enabling work from home as one of its greatest failures. Yet, many voices have argued that such displaced work is actually one of the most negative trends of technology, voices not the least of which include Heather Menzies’ *Whose Brave New World?* A similar assumption is that all “work and

workers would move from the cities to the countryside.” Now, while I can fathom why everyone might decide to live in the country, I can also fathom many reasons, often social, why everyone might want to remain in the cities. This book claims that technology has fallen short of such a promise; I would argue that no such promise was ever made, and would like to see justifications for why such a promise would even be desired.

Of course, one cannot deny a few gems of wisdom sprinkled amongst this work. The dichotomy between process and practice, for instance, is an interesting case study that raises some fascinating questions about the socially enabling power of technology. Yet it is only one case study. Such stories deserve to be told in a story-telling premise, not in the guise of a discussion following sound qualitative and quantitative research methods.