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A Normative Theory of the Information Society

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A Normative Theory of the Information Society. By Alistair S. Duff. London: Routledge, 2012. Pp. ix+157. $125.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-415-95571-3.

Alistair S. Duff has been writing interesting works about social conceptualizations of the information society since the mid-1990s. His earlier works have examined the origins of the information society paradigm, surveyed the pre-2001 research literature related to the information society, and discussed connections between the information society and social engineering, and in 2004 he explored the need for normative analysis in information policy. One can easily trace Duff's progress toward the presently reviewed book; the aforementioned themes of the history of the information society, social engineering, and the normative attributes of information policy are the scaffolding used to support the Rawls-Tawney approach to evaluating information policy that is the centerpiece of this new monograph.

Duff first introduced his Rawls-Tawney Theorem in a 2011 article published in the *Journal for the American Society of Information Science and Technology* (vol. 62, no. 3). He combined the Rawlsian (John Rawls) concept of social justice in terms of equitable distribution of public goods—information being the "goods" in this case—with R. H. Tawney's parameters on how large the difference should or should not be between the richest and the poorest in terms of information. In this Routledge book, which is part of the Routledge Research in Information Technology and Society series, Duff provides a more detailed discussion of the theorem, creating an ethics-based argument in favor of information policy with a social equality–focused agenda.

Structurally the book is divided into four sections or broad chapters. The first chapter presents the argument that the information society is currently somewhere in-between a nascent and a fully developed stage. Duff argues that normative theory is needed to help shape the identity of the information society as it continues to mature. He presents both the utopian and the conservative critical views on the future of the information society and argues that a "bounded utopian" or normative approach will allow "a model of an ideal society that can orientate mundane decision-making" (20). He focuses acutely on information as a democratic tool, and he uses a "journalistic conception of information" (21). This centers heavily on news media as the primary information contributing to democratic informed decision-making processes.

Chapter 2 unpacks the Rawls-Tawney Theorem, which Duff presents as providing a normative perspective on information issues such as privacy, freedom of information and government transparency, information security, and social inequities that result in information access inequities, writing that there is a "murky borderland between ethics and politics" and that "the normative theory of the information society involves the application of a doctrine of social ethics to post-industrialism" (32). Although Tawney's overtly socialist ideals are half of the theorem Duff presents, in chapter 3, Duff states that it is not his objective to attempt to

advocate the vertical or arithmetic equality connected with Tawneyism, where "everyone must not only start the race simultaneously but also end together" (76) regardless of skill, effort, or accountability. Instead, Duff promotes horizontal equality, which "treats people differently, where appropriate," focusing on equity of access rather than the "equal distribution of information goods" (77). In other words, Duff's argument is that everyone needs to have an equal chance at information access but that does not necessarily mean all will end up with the same amount of information.

Throughout chapter 3, Duff uses terms such as "information poverty" and "information excess" (80) to describe the inequities that need amelioration. Unfortunately, information poverty and information excess are not richly defined or explored here. It appears that Duff intends to use information poverty to refer to situations in which a systact, or a group of individuals with common roles and in a common locale, are denied the same level of information access afforded systacts with information excess ("systact" being the term he uses throughout his argument). Here the Rawlsian ideal of all members of society having an equal chance to the same social benefits (access to information, in this case) is partnered with Tawney's peaks-and-valley's imagery, stating that one cannot fill the chasm of poverty in a society without winnowing down the Himalayan peaks of excess (49). However, Duff does not consider all information to be of equal value. Building on the journalistic definition of information put forward in chapter 1, Duff provides four categories of information in order of their importance within the democratic system: (1) information about "hard news," that is, foreign and domestic political developments and current affairs, (2) scientific, technical, and medical information, (3) economic information, and (4) religious information (79). He recommends that policy need not focus on providing equal amounts of all these categories of information but rather "information subsidies" (85) and "fair social distribution of information" are the Rawls-Tawney-esque responses to the inequities that face the "worst-off group" (80) and should be relevant to the social value of the information in question. For example, hard news information should be subsidized, whereas religious information usually does not need to be. It is not clearly explained how to winnow the Himalayas of information excess, although in the final chapter (chap. 4) Duff does present social engineering as the solution to the problem of information inequality.

In chapter 4, Duff writes that concentrated and advanced-level social engineering is necessary to normalize information behaviors, policies, and practices that make "social morality into effective norms, thereby making possible a new information and communication order" (98). He argues that failing to equalize information access among all systacts will lead to other inequalities, "adding new twists to old problems as well as creating new information-related dilemmas," as marginalization leads to individuals who do not have "hard information" to begin to believe they do not want or need it (97).

The central argument, that viewing the information society through a social lens will add dimension to our understanding of digital divides and information access issues, is not new.

However, the Rawls-Tawney Theorem does add to the discussion an element of socialist equality that is not currently prevalent in the information society literature.

The literature Duff uses to support his arguments throughout his book is familiar in information society study and digital divide discussions. While the book has an overall UK perspective, Duff references European, US, and Japanese government white papers to provide a layer of international perspective on the topics discussed. In terms of readability, while the reasoning throughout the book is logical, the language used to present the arguments is often baffling. In many sections the writing style complicates otherwise straightforward arguments. That said, the book does have a certain poetic rhythm that carries its own charm beyond the discussion itself.

The book does contribute a new lens through which to observe information society. It also provides a theoretical basis for policies and social practices that can support the development of the information society with social ethics and inclusion in mind.

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Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand. By Valerie J. Gross. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012. Pp. xvi+161. $48.00 (paper). ISBN 978-1-59884-770-3.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a word can also create an extremely precise picture, especially when it comes to how libraries can communicate their value. Valerie J. Gross, president and CEO of Howard County Library System in Maryland, argues in her book *Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand* that the language library professionals use can make or break them during these tough economic times. Libraries need to adopt the terminology of the education system in order to convey the significance of the work they do and the services they provide. The book begins with a discussion about the importance of language, then explores how to transform library terminology, and concludes with practical advice on how to implement an education perspective in a library. Ultimately, *Transforming Our Image, Building Our Brand* serves as an effective case study for how a public library can successfully utilize the language of education to enhance its image.

In the first chapters of the book, Gross argues that in order for libraries to survive the current economic crisis, they need to rethink their brand. She uses the example of Evian and contends that consumers are willing to pay more for Evian than generic bottled water because of the luxurious words and images that are used in Evian's promotion. Gross argues that the same would be true for libraries if they used the terminology of the education system to describe themselves. "It occurred to us that schools, colleges, and universities do not need continually to