

vol 6 no 6 May 2001

contents

The Social Life of Information	1
Future Focus	2
The Well	3
The Bolivian Times	4
The Power of Spirit	4
Economics and Culture	5
Future Survey Super Seventy — Best Books 1996-2000	5

to order books:

To purchase a book through the **BookClub** this month, simply click the email hyperlink at the end of each review to send a request by email.

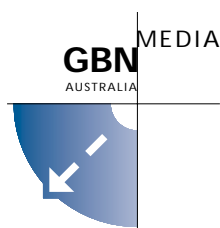
You may pay by cheque (to GBN Australia) or credit card, but please do not send card details by email. You may fax these details to Melissa, phone her or alternatively she will contact you. We can readily process additional orders once we have these details on file. Our prices include freight and GST.

GBNA will accommodate customers with a secure facility in the near future. Sorry for any inconvenience.

ph: (02) 9439 4255 fax: (02) 9439 4511

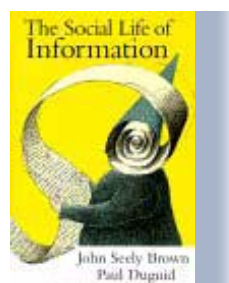
bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

www.gbnaust.com.au



The Social Life of Information

John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid



FORMAT: Hardback
ISBN: 0-87584-762-5
PUBLISHER: Harvard Business
School Press
PUB DATE: February 2000

Books in the critical tradition are not common in management literature, and so it is indeed refreshing when one is encountered; especially when its essential focus is challenging one of the great shibboleths of this age of information — the centrality of information itself! 'Living in the information age,' the authors posit, 'can occasionally feel like being driven by someone with tunnel vision.' Those who would drive us hard into the future on the back of new technologies 'appear to assume that if we all focus hard enough on information, then we will get to where we want to go most directly'. But such a focus, they contend, inevitably devalues significant matters such as context, background, history, common knowledge and social resources, which are all far more relevant than many of the info-techies would have us believe.

This might sound like a rerun of the age-old discourse about the distinctions between information and knowledge, and the role of the individual learner in converting the former to the latter. But the thesis that Seely Brown and Duguid present is more profound than that as they argue the central significance of the idea that both information and individuals are always part of rich social networks. As they see it, '[a]ttending too closely to information overlooks the social context that helps people understand what that information might mean, and why it matters'. And people are vital here. Where, in an information economy, people tend to be treated as interchangeable consumers and mere processors of information, in a knowledge economy, people are privileged as the 'creators and carriers' of such knowledge. The shift in

focus from information (and its acquisition) to knowledge (and learning) heralds a shift from impersonal processes to personal practices, and it is through communities of practice and the matrix of networks that connect them that organisations function most effectively. This shift also reflects the shift from learning about, to learning to be — the very essence of process to practice.

The authors present a very interesting take on networks which is counter to that which is invariably presented, where the network, subsuming communities, organisations and nations alike, 'is all, configuring itself more or less as the vaunted global village'. From the perspective of practice rather than process or information, the Seely Brown and Duguid view is that any global network has a highly varied topography that results in information travelling in a very non-uniform manner throughout the network according to local topography. This has very important implications in organisations not the least being the frequent cause of fundamental errors in predictions about the effects of new information technologies on organisation.

In the pursuit of their arguments, Seely Brown and Duguid traverse a very wide territory: from the role of software driven 'chatterbots' in the organisation of information, through the challenges of the home office, to the communities of practice that loosely couple with each other to form the type of matrix of networks that characterise places like Silicon Valley. The pervasive

theme here echoes that which emanated from the Tavistock Institute some 30 years ago or so — the need to think in terms not of technology or of people in and of their respective selves, but of the integrated socio-technical systems that people and technology combine to make together.

The commentary that these two authors provide in support of their position is as compelling as it is counterpointing to the great info-myths that already seem so pervasive. It is a critical reflection on the information age. These are no lightweight commentators either. Seely Brown is Chief Scientist at Xerox Corporation and Director of the renowned Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, while Duguid is a research specialist in Social and Cultural Studies in Education at UC Berkeley. Among the many issues that they raise in support of their thesis, is the importance of storytelling in the process of sharing and collectively applying knowledge in practice. And the book itself well illustrates this very point. This is a fascinating story that exemplifies the power of the synergy that is possible when genuine collaboration occurs. ●

Richard Bawden, GBN Australia.

Our Price: A\$56.60

To buy bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

... review

Future Focus: how 21 companies are capturing 21st century success

Theodore B Kinni and Al Ries



FORMAT: Hardback
ISBN: 1-900-961-652
PUBLISHER: Capstone
PUB DATE: September 2000

Talking of knowledge ... Did you know that the belief now prevailing within Royal Dutch/Shell is that crude oil, currently its major product, will be eclipsed in the face of renewable energy sources during this century? Did you know that Game Boy, a product of the giant Nintendo corporation that started life as a manufacturer of playing cards more than a century ago, is the biggest selling video system in

history? Did you know that beer drinkers around the world are consuming something in the order of 56,000 glasses of Heineken beer per minute? And did you know that Zantac, Zovirax, Zofran and Zinnat, all owned by the largest pharmaceutical company in the world, the Glaxo Wellcome conglomerate, are among the world's 50 top selling prescription medications?

Well you would have known these things, and a whole lot more facts about some of the world's most successful businesses, if you had already read this book. What is much more to the point is that these four companies, in concert with a further 17 other companies that the authors of this book have studied over recent years, share a number of characteristics in common. They are all innovative, global in scope, and very focused with respect to what they are trying to achieve. They have all also had their share of failures, which they have not only survived, but learned from. As Theodore Kinni and Al Ries see it, it is these four particular characteristics, drawn from studies of the histories as well as the present activities of these companies that bode extremely well for their futures. They make the case that a sound study of the

history of corporations is essential to understand how best they might deal with the future.

The book is not merely an amazing compendium of data and information about the 21 companies, which were drawn from nine different countries on three continents, and which can be characterised as successful in the past and well positioned to succeed in the future too. It is also replete with the knowledge generated by them, about what they believe these corporations are doing to capture '21st century success'. There are lessons galore here, for those who would look at their own histories as guides to future success.

This is a very timely tome for there is nothing more important when bad news abounds and optimism flags,

than good-news stories. And in spite of their sheer empiricism, these are essentially good-news tales about how to succeed in business by really trying!

An important piece of research this book is thorough in its presentation. The lessons the authors promote for succeeding in the future are worth repeating: get and stay focused, be innovative, go global, and be prepared for hard times. Are you? ●

Richard Bowden, GBN Australia.

Our Price: A\$67.95

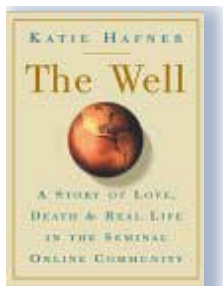
To buy bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

... review

The Well

A story of love, death and real life in the seminal online community

Katie Hafner



FORMAT: Hardback

ISBN: 0-7867-0846-8

PUBLISHER: Carroll & Graf

PUB DATE: May 2001

Well, well, it's the story of internet outpost The Well — a seminal online forum built around Stewart Brand's Whole Earth community on technology and a couple of modems

furnished by Larry Brilliant. NY Times journalist, Katie Hafner, relays a history of The Well through a series of nostalgic conversations which at times leave the reader feeling 'you had to be there' (or not be there, in a virtual sense). As much a reference book as a story, *The Well* contextualises the natterings of a bunch of brainy hippies who followed a dream, discussed tarantula sex, told each other off and, in the process, defined the rules of online interaction.

The Well offered its constituents a rich fusion of online conversation and offline experience, an understanding

that predated the painful lesson of last year's dot com collapse by some 15 years.

He [Brand] sensed that the most interesting possibility to arise from knitting electronic dialogue into the fabric of everyday life would lie not in championing either the virtual or the human-contact model but rather in finding the place where they overlapped and how each activity fuelled the other.

Today's P2P boom, as championed by Napster, FreeNet, etc, is predicated on Brand's simple idea:

Find a bunch of people who were associated by something ... their preference in wine or their taste in music ... give them the means to stay in continuous communication; and step back and see what happens.

And, of course, Brand's decree that 'you own your own words' has remained the one hard and fast rule for online raconteurs.

The wacky Well beings explore the symbiosis between mankind and machine, debating the appropriate use of technology to shape the principles of their community. Their story nods to *The Social Life of Information* thesis, inadvertently acknowledging that, while $1+1=3$, people are the lifeblood of the network. ●

Andrew Campion, GBN Australia.

Our Price: A\$49.95

To buy bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

The Bolivian Times

Tim Elliot

FORMAT: Hardback

ISBN: 1-74051-025-9

PUBLISHER: Random House

PUB DATE: May 2001



A very funny true story of tear gas, heartbreak, bad Spanish, cocaine and deadlines, *The Bolivian Times* strikes the balance between punchy storytelling and informative read. Elliot's scatty tales are punctuated with insights on the issues for Bolivia, like the war on drugs:

... local law enforcement in these countries would, with the support of the US DEA, eradicate the crops from which cocaine was made. There would be large-scale interdiction, mega-busts and public incineration of illicit substances, all of which would make good TV and give people the feeling that something would be done. Rather than address its own drug problem, America had found a way of shifting the focus: a way, in essence, of blaming other people.

The issues invariably become *an* issue — *la coca* (cocaine). Elliot realises 'all of Bolivia's problems were, when it came down to it, somehow connected to *la coca*', recounting a few problems with the substance himself along the way. But the issues for this young man go beyond *la coca*, into the intrepid territory that confronts every young man: Does she love me? Do I love her? What the hell am I doing in this country?

And the kid can write. This is indeed a funny story that bounds along:

I brushed up on my Bolivian politics by consulting the most indispensable of research tools, 'Lonely Planet'. The country was even more of a shambles than I'd thought. Assassination, coups, corruption and repression ... and that was just the Post and Communications section.

Elliot takes us into the heart and mind of Generation X, as he wanders haphazardly through remote villages, jungles and crazed *fiestas*, but somehow — perhaps through youthful bravado — managing to make a go of things. Just! ●

Our Price: A\$21.95

To buy bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

The Power of Spirit

How Organizations Transform

Harrison Owen

FORMAT: Paperback

ISBN: 1-57675-090-6

PUBLISHER: Berrett-Koehler

PUB DATE: December 2000



Two years ago, GBN Australia hosted a learning barbie with Harrison Owen, pioneer of Open Space, a methodology for strategic development. Harrison returned to Australia in March this year to run a series of conversations on his new book, The Power of Spirit, as a turning point for individuals and organisations. Oliver Freeman launched The Power of Spirit at the University of Technology in Sydney on 28 March 2001.

Just as consciousness evolves in individuals, so too does it evolve in organisations. As spirit forms and transforms in people, they become strong, focused and vibrant — and wonderful things can happen. But when the spirit is down, nothing else seems to make a difference — because not too much happens. Many of us today find ourselves trapped in just such organisations.

The spirit in our workplace, to say nothing of our own spirit, is getting a little tattered, showing the early signs of what Owen calls 'Soul Pollution'. Those in the advanced stages may find themselves plagued by exhaustion, high levels of stress, and the abuse of just about anything in sight — including spouses, substances and fellow workers. So what is the secret to transforming organisations? The answer, says Owen, is simple: we simply have to consciously be what we already are — and transformation will happen all by itself.

Owen examines the world of spirit/consciousness in organisations and offers practical help to those who find themselves dreading another day on the job in an organisation seemingly bent on its own destruction, as well as the destruction of its members. ●

Our Price: A\$39.95

To buy bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

Economics and Culture

David Throsby



FORMAT: Paperback
ISBN: 0-52158-639-9
PUBLISHER: Cambridge University Press
PUB DATE: February 2001

In an increasingly globalised world, economic and cultural imperatives can be seen as two of the most powerful forces shaping human behaviour. Launched by GBN Australia in

March, this book considers the relationship between economics and culture both as areas of intellectual discourse, and as systems of societal organisation. Adopting a broad definition of culture, the book explores the economic dimensions of culture, and the cultural context of economics.

The book, by GBN Australia lateral poppy, David Throsby, is built on a foundation of value theory, developing the twin notions of economic and cultural value as underlying principles for integrating the two fields. Ideas of cultural capital and sustainability are discussed, especially as means of analysing the particular problems of cultural heritage, drawing parallels with the treatment of natural capital in ecological economics. The book goes on to discuss: the economics of creativity in the production of artistic goods and services; culture in economic development; the cultural industries; and cultural policy. ●

Our Price: A\$37.95

To buy bookclub@gbnaust.com.au

... special

Future Survey Super Seventy — Best Books 1996-2000

Michael Marien

A 'good' futures book is admittedly a rather slippery concept. As defined here, it meets most or all of five criteria: it is broad and multidisciplinary; it is about important matters; it is authoritative; it is original; and it is a pleasure to read. Put four or five of these attributes together and you have a book to be excited about.

Future Survey is a monthly abstract of books, articles, and reports concerning forecasts, trends and ideas about the future. The 'Future Survey Super Seventy' is a highly selective winnowing of the 3000 abstracts published in *Future Survey* over the past five years. In this essay, editor Michael Marien has selected 70 of the very best books, organised the books into eight categories and summarised the reasons for his choices:

- **World Futures** – thought in this area acknowledges globalisation as the major trend, reviewing books such as *Global Transformations* by David Held et al and Gorbachev's *On My Country and the World*.
- **Global Economy** – *The Long Boom* tops the list in this category, complemented by *Natural Capitalism* and others.
- **Business** – a hot category, since the mid-90s with books by many of the usual suspects and some less usual and less suspect such as social critic Jeremy Rifkin and his *The Age of Access*.
- **Environment and Resources** – offers a wide array of

great choices, such as *Our Forests, Our Future*, the report of the World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development, which highlights the accelerated loss of forested area worldwide and wide-spread corrupt practices that encourage forest loss.

- **Society and Cities** – this selection considers subjects such as the general migration to cities, social health, work, even architecture. *The Futures of Women* by Pamela McCorduck and Nancy Ramsey had its origins in a GBN WorldView meeting.
- **Health** – provides a diverse selection of provocative works that consider the ups, downs and related questions to changes in health, reviewing books such as Robin Baker's *Sex in the Future* and *Critical Issues in Global Health* edited by C Everett Koop et al.
- **Science and Technology** – leads with the 1996 book *2025* by Joseph F Coates et al and reviews a cascade of great books since.
- **Methods** – here one book is recommended in each of three categories – probable, possible, and preferable futures, the *Encyclopedia of the Future* gets a mention, as does Stewart Brand's *The Clock of the Long Now*.

Of course, there is no single 'killer' book that tells it all and gives the big picture. Collectively these selections provide an overview of the best of recent futures thinking, providing a balance between popular and academic writing, well known and little known titles, futurist and nonfuturist authors and global themes.

Free for new and current subscribers to *Future Survey* (US\$89 per year), see www.wfs.org/fsurv.htm or email info@wfs.org. ●