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**Book Review**

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Review

## A Normative Theory of the Information Society

By

Alistair Duff

### Book Review

This single authored monograph provides an in-depth discussion and analysis of a proposed normative theory of the information society. This book delves into complex theoretical and philosophical perspectives from the outset. The often complex language makes this a challenging and yet worthwhile read. The book starts by providing background on the need for a normative theory of the information society by drawing on the work of Bell, and others and then goes on to propose a Rawls/Tawney synthesis to inform the discussion. This discussion provides interesting perspectives on Rawls social democratic convergent theory and Turney's ethical theories. This leads to a consideration about the commodification of information, and how this should remain a social utility. This Duff argues means that in a post industrialist economy based on services and information, information technology revolution and information explosion, a liberal distributive justice, and social equality plus economic justice model can be considered.

The book then sets out a proposal for information in post-industrial societies. Firstly, a principle of information justice is indicated. This would require an open polity that would justly administer constitutional, electoral and statutory information, administration and other official information, alongside personal information. Secondly, the importance of sharing, which includes equality of access that should provide the greatest benefit to the most disadvantaged, and so should not be so extensive as to generate class divisions. The book then goes on to focus on the importance of access to institutions within the scope of the Rawls-Tawney theorem, to conclude that background political institutions should remain largely the same, although there should be provision for revision, alongside space for new institutions. Duff here acknowledges that there is some concern about the oversight of large government organisations, which is particularly poignant in light of recent revelations of the extent of government surveillance in modern western democracies.

The final chapter discusses social engineering and the industrial and post- industrial attempts to shift society towards a perceived greater good.

One of the difficulties for today's society as highlighted by the author is the unequal distribution of information in the current information society. He considers information to be of such importance that it should be added to Rawls 'primary goods' list. Further it is also acknowledged that it is very difficult to engage with people who do not wish to know information, even if it would be beneficial to them. It is perhaps no surprise then that Governments and businesses have long since adopted a variety of social engineering approaches to 'nudge' populations towards a variety of ideological or business ends, by the use of authoritarian coercion, albeit without the violence. However, this approach does not sit comfortably with the views of liberty and freedom within modern western democracies, and the author does acknowledge the dangers of social engineering, when he states that 'it is difficult to see the patenting of strands of human code as anything other than social engineering in the hands of a spectacularly brazen form of predatory capitalism'.

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3 The book concludes by offering a post-industrial view of social engineering alongside a  
4 normative theory of the Information Society. In this way, the author proposes a (albeit apparently  
5 benign) form, of social engineering. This is presented as a middle ground which sits between the  
6 piecemeal approach of the Fabian's and the blueprint approach of Marxism.  
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9 In summary, the book proposes a Rawls-Tawney Theorem from which the normative theory of  
10 the information society can be derived, and which presents a culturally conservative approach  
11 that requires some restraint on politically or commercially oppressive innovations. In addition, an  
12 informatised social democracy requires an egalitarian approach to social engineering, which  
13 should be modular, and seek to engineer and reform institutions rather than individuals. And  
14 further, that it does not reject, but rather builds on the decisions of previous majorities to help  
15 create a balance between polity, culture and the economy.  
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