Metadata & Discovery Group

Book review: Information Science: History, Ideas, Applications

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Seadle, Michael (2025) *Information Science: History, Ideas, Applications*. London: Facet Publishing. ISBN 978-1-78330-694-7 (paperback)

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This book presents a multifaceted analysis of the idea of information science. Its scope is wide, moving from the history of information and of information science as a discipline to information behaviour, institutions working with information, language and culture, technology and artificial intelligence, data science, non-verbal information, information retrieval and information integrity. The width of its scope might be its strongest point, particularly in the way it attempts to bring all these apparently disparate areas together under the unifying idea of information.

In considering the notion of information itself, Seadle asks "what exactly is information in scholarly and philosophical terms?" A structured answer to that question is nowhere to be found in the book. Perhaps because it is considered to be evident enough, perhaps because it is expected that the efforts to define information science as a discipline would offer a good enough insight into the nature of its object. We are told right at the beginning that "information is ubiquitous", and that that is part of the problem when defining information science as a discipline. It is probably the case that this is also part of the problem when defining information itself. The lack of such a definition, however, leaves us wondering about the principles assumed by the author in his understanding of the discipline. And, subsequently, it leaves us wondering about the principles we are ourselves being asked to assume. In that sense, even if Seadle declares that "information science today does not and should not claim to be developing natural laws", and that "it is pragmatic rather than theory driven", his characterisation of the idea of information and related ideas throughout the book seem to effectively imply a certain number of ontological commitments. So, even if these commitments do not interfere with the declared pragmatism of the discipline, it would not be completely correct to present it as not theory driven.

In a key passage, for example, Seadle states that "pure information exists apart from culture. The law of gravity applies to objects in all cultural contexts. The laws of nature

exist outside of human culture, but the values that people assign to these facts vary". Elsewhere, he declares that "every aspect of the world implicitly contains information", that information itself is "older than any human awareness that information even exists", that "language may not be essential to information, but it helps when assigning meaning and sharing that meaning with others", and that information science's core subject is "fundamentally timeless", even if he later goes on to say that things only "formally have information content once thinking creatures assign meanings to them". If "every aspect of the world implicitly contains information", then we could feel justified in believing that information emanates from it without anybody's participation: individuals would simply actualise it by giving it meaning, that is, by having an understanding of it. This would, somehow, seem to suggest that production and communication are ultimately not necessary to information's core essence. Information at its purest would be there, beyond language and culture, waiting for us, and it would be accessible in different ways and at different levels depending on the context.

I think this point of view is clearly at work when Seadle, quoting Steiner, brings up Heidegger's idea that language "remains the master of man". He does so to highlight that words are "information carriers" that can have different meanings in different contexts and affect how information is understood. This seems to be missing something fundamental in Heidegger, something deeper: language does not simply transmit an already existing and intelligible reality that the human being would try to express with more or less mastery. It is the way we build our reality, we are born into it, we are it.

Apart from these conceptual disagreements, I had a couple of additional reservations about the book. China is repeatedly used as the main alternative or comparison to the European experience, while India, the Islamic world and other historically significant cultures receive much less sustained, and much more cursory, attention. Of course, no single volume could cover all of these, but more varied examples could have offered a different picture of what information meant, and how it worked in very different historical and cultural contexts. I was also surprised by Seadle's extensive referencing from Wikipedia. He himself warns us against relying on it instead of following its references to more authoritative sources, but the book's bibliography contains twenty-six Wikipedia entries. I find these two things difficult to reconcile.

None of these reservations prevented me from appreciating the book. As mentioned above, its greatest strength is perhaps the number and variety of questions it raises, and its presentation of information science as a field that can engage with a wide range of human activities and disciplines. It also constitutes a very interesting opportunity for those working in the information field to think about our contributions in a less insular, more connected way: as a shared effort towards a higher common goal.