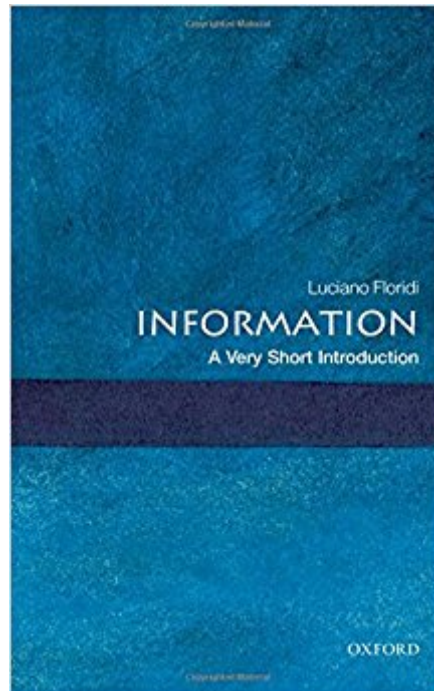




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Information: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

We live in a society that is awash with information, but few of us really understand what information is. In this Very Short Introduction, one of the world's leading authorities on the philosophy of information and on information ethics, Luciano Floridi, offers an illuminating exploration of information as it relates to both philosophy and science. He discusses the roots of the concept of information in mathematics and science, and considers the role of information in several fields, including biology. Floridi also discusses concepts such as "Infoglut" (too much information to process) and the emergence of an information society, and he addresses the nature of information as a communication process and its place as a physical phenomenon. Perhaps more important, he explores information's meaning and value, and ends by considering the broader social and ethical issues relating to information, including problems surrounding accessibility, privacy, ownership, copyright, and open source. This book helps us understand the true meaning of the concept and how it can be used to understand our world.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

Book Information

Paperback: 160 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (March 26, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199551375

ISBN-13: 978-0199551378

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.6 x 4.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 26 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #68,279 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #19 in Books > Law > Intellectual Property #136 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Modern #141 in Books > Business & Money > Management & Leadership > Information Management

Customer Reviews

Splendidly pellucid. * Steven Poole, The Guardian *

Luciano Floridi is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information at the University of Oxford, Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, and Fellow of St Cross College, Oxford. Among his recognitions, he has been appointed the Gauss Professor by the Academy of Sciences in Göttingen, and is recipient of the APA's Barwise Prize, the IACAP's Covey Award, and the INSEIT's Weizenbaum Award. He is an AISB and BCS Fellow, Editor in Chief of Philosophy & Technology and of the Synthese Library, and was Chairman of EU Commission's 'Onlife' research group. His most recent books are: *The Philosophy of Information* (OUP, 2011), *Information: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2010), and *The Cambridge Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics* (CUP, 2010).

This great little book is a quickly readable survey of information science, with an emphasis on philosophy and ethics rather than problem solving or business. Two other extremes (not counting the dozen wonderful Dover titles on information theory for under \$5 which are certainly worthwhile) include:

1. Luenberger: *Information Science* David's book is about \$90 US and our databases show it to be the most used IS textbook, even though it is a 2006 edition. In about 450 pages, it covers the practical applications as well as theory of the entire field of information science, from Shannon to smart phones and economics, minus the "wow how cool is IS" as well as the "we're drowning in info and can't get up" spins.
2. Seife: *Decoding the Universe: How the New Science of Information Is Explaining Everything in the Cosmos, from Our Brains to Black Holes* Also from 2006, available used for a penny on some third party offers, 296 pages. Very Short Intro (VSI- Floridi) fits nicely between the two. Seife is a wonderful page-turner and a must have if you're into information and math. His "zero" book (*Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*) was a best seller, and also is about 50c used-- an awesome survey of math. Seife covers both practical problem solving and "meta" issues, but is much less thick and ponderous than Floridi, which has to be studied a little more carefully to get the nuances (not a bad thing). But Floridi isn't all "heavy" -- he talks about a researcher in the "near future" (a million years from now) evaluating our current information leaps!

All three texts cover Shannon, but Floridi and Luenberger do so more with generality and reverence, whereas Seife goes into DEEP detail about redundancy, logarithms, the relationship of amplitudes/ signals to codecs (as in Shannon's connecting log forms to entropy), etc. including a great appendix ON logs. If you enjoy math as well as story telling, Seife delivers. Floridi is of course much more "up to date" in stats (zettabytes!) etc. since he's more current, but you don't really gain or lose anything there, since much of Floridi is about challenging and re-defining at the conceptual, ideational and definitional levels. If you want detailed, applied, usable problem solving, get Luenberger, if you want a "can't put

it down" fun read that touches on the fact that we're "really" living in the Matrix, 13th floor, Tron, etc.-- Seife is the ticket. Both Seife and Floridi give that "wow" feeling that we are really information living in information for the sake of, well, information! They both adequately portray the revolutionary wonder of moving from matter to energy to information in our world view, getting more and more universal (or at the risk of induction, which they both trash-- general), at each leap. The difference is, Floridi is dry and methodical, Seife is fun and amazing, but you need a little more "math love" with Seife on the other hand. Luenberger is, well, a text. Yes, the best text BUT I include him here mostly for the readers that are looking for less wonder and philosophy and more practical "What does all this mean for careers, business, applications, search engines... etc. All three rate 5 stars, for what they intend to be. Library Picks reviews only for the benefit of shoppers and has nothing to do with , the authors, manufacturers or publishers of the items we review. We always buy the items we review for the sake of objectivity, and although we search for gems, are not shy about trashing an item if it's a waste of time or money for shoppers. If the reviewer identifies herself, her job or her field, it is only as a point of reference to help you gauge the background and any biases.

I decided to explore the Information Age with 3 books. Since I hoped that Professor Floridi's book would provide foundational knowledge, it was first. The next two will be Adam Segal's "The Hacked World Order" and Thomas Davenport's and Julia Kirby's "Only Humans Need Apply." I will review these books as I finish them. Professor Floridi explores information in its various forms - largely digital, but also analogue, quantum, genetic, biological systems, economic (with a brief exposure to game theory) and the ethics of information. Claude Shannon plays an early, and important, role in the development of the mathematical theory of communication. But, if you experience an involuntary cautionary response to the word "math," don't worry, the book doesn't contain much of it. I wish that the book included a little more of the math underlying Claude Shannon's theory of communication, but perhaps Professor Floridi realized that this would be too much for a reader such as me. The book provides a useful overview of the field. Some of the observations will seem self-evident and little more than common sense. Some I had not encountered before such as "information minus meaning equals data" or said another way "data plus meaning equals information." What algorithms or models that one uses to impose meaning on data is left to the reader. I gave the book 4 stars and not 5 because of his approach to the ethics of information. Some of the ethics arise from law, which seemed relatively unremarkable. However, he also make the claim that information embodied, for example, in paintings or the environment seem to have ethical rights. The Professor and I could find common ground in agreeing that defacing the Mona Lisa or dumping harmful chemicals into

streams and rivers is a very bad idea. I am not sure that I am ready to go as far as he does in extending the concept of independent ethical rights. The book served the purpose that I described above. Much of the book visited areas with which I had prior familiarity and some of it explored new territory. I occasionally had to review portions of the book to draw out its meaning. It provided a useful foundation for my investigation of the current status of the Information Age. I recommend it.

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