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Book Review

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Chan, L. et al 2002. *Budapest Open Access Initiative*. New York: Open Society Institute. Available at: <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/read.shtml> [Retrieved 22 January 2007].

Whitworth, A. 2009. *Information Obesity*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing. 231 pp. ISBN 978 1 84334 449 0. £47. Pbk.

**Reviewed by Professor Nick Frost, Professor of Social Work, Leeds Metropolitan University.
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This is an interesting and stimulating book that draws on social theory and organisational analysis and provides accessible material on the history and deployment of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The author is an accomplished social theorist who is passionately committed to the practical utilisation of ICT. This passion is particularly strong when it comes to an emphasis on the potential role of ICT in critical learning and for a radical liberationist form of politics.

Whitworth's title gives away his main argument – that we are faced with vast amounts of information and that this is both challenging and problematic, just as the more usual use of the word obesity suggests that we have access too much food and often consume it in an unhealthy manner. It is useful to be supported by the book in reflecting on one's own life and on the impact of what has probably been the major social change in the workplace during the last two decades. 'Information Obesity' has transformed our work and personal lives in ways that are still unfolding in their implications.

The book is both well written and clearly structured. Part One addresses 'Information and technology in the world', examining the author's use of terms, the role of information and the centrality of ICT in this. Part Two explores 'The impact of information technology', including a brief history and an examination of literacy and critical thinking. Part Three has a clear focus on 'Critical theory', drawing largely on Habermas and Fay. This is a very helpful introduction to critical theory in its own right. The book concludes with Part Four, in many ways being more applied and addressing issues of teaching and learning, and the deployment of information. The flow and structure work well in guiding the reader through some complex and demanding material in a clear, coherent and logical manner.

The material is also well supported by an accessible and interesting website with links to related resources. The reader can choose to join a discussion group to reflect on shared issues and concerns arising from the book. There are many complex and demanding ideas in the book, but they can perhaps best be summarised in the following quotation:

The idea that a communicatively-rational approach to learning can *reduce the amount* of information we must absorb (or filter out) is a false assumption. But I suggest that such an approach can *increase the quality* of the information that makes it through the filters. This is "quality" measured in a specific way; information that can be understood *and then applied* within a community setting, a process that sustains the "ecology of resources" which that community can use in the future' (pp 156-7).

Here we can see the core of Whitworth's argument, a theoretical approach to the generation and management of information, but with clear and practical implications for educational settings and for the wider society.

The practical edge of Whitworth's work is present throughout his book and is informed by a political and value commitment that:

ultimately, the aim of a truly *critical* IL [information literacy] education would be the reversal of general trends towards the exclusion of most people from participation in the debates, decisions, activities and processes of knowledge formation affecting their lives' (p.118).

There are some slight reservations about this book. First, I was surprised about the absence of the work of Manuel Castells, as in my view Castell's work would have sat well with that adopted by Whitworth, and would have added both some depth and breadth in places. I still find Castells' trilogy *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* the most valuable text on the Information Society, and arguably more grounded than the Habermasian approach adopted here. Second, whilst the book is lucidly written, the style is a little too self-conscious in places; there is too much about the author's home town and football team, for example (see page 186). In summary, the book and the website provide a useful and stimulating resource for those of us interested in these issues, and in particular in the transformative power of information.

Reference

Castells, M. 1996-8. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.