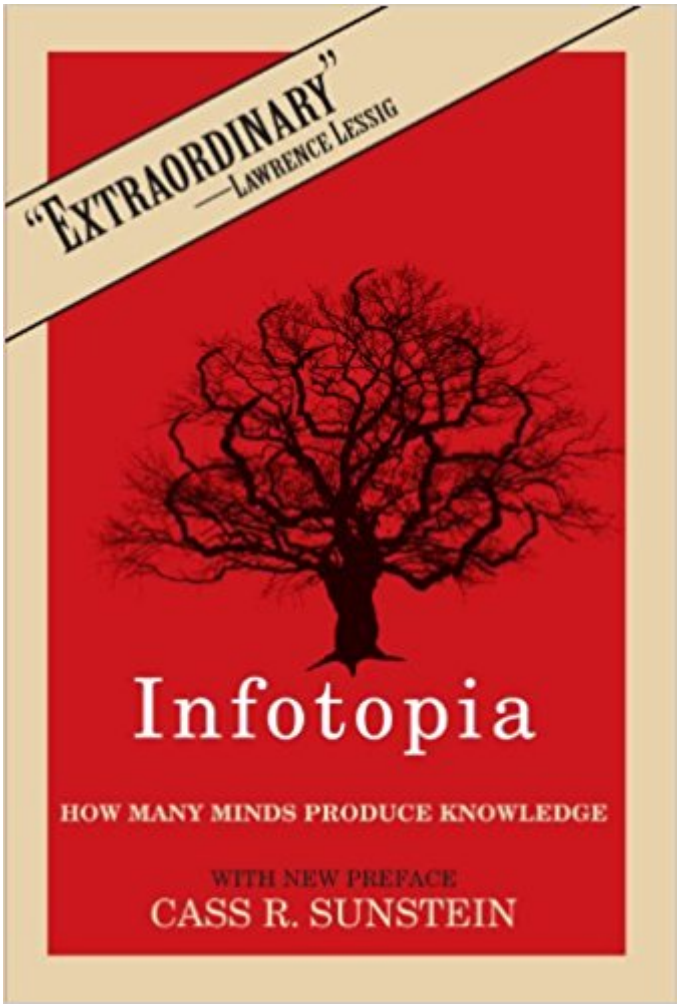
Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge



Synopsis

The rise of the "information society" offers not only considerable peril but also great promise. Beset from all sides by a never-ending barrage of media, how can we ensure that the most accurate information emerges and is heeded? In this book, Cass R. Sunstein develops a deeply optimistic understanding of the human potential to pool information, and to use that knowledge to improve our lives. In an age of information overload, it is easy to fall back on our own prejudices and insulate ourselves with comforting opinions that reaffirm our core beliefs. Crowds quickly become mobs. The justification for the Iraq war, the collapse of Enron, the explosion of the space shuttle Columbia--all of these resulted from decisions made by leaders and groups trapped in "information cocoons," shielded from information at odds with their preconceptions. How can leaders and ordinary people challenge insular decision making and gain access to the sum of human knowledge? Stunning new ways to share and aggregate information, many Internet-based, are helping companies, schools, governments, and individuals not only to acquire, but also to create, ever-growing bodies of accurate knowledge. Through a ceaseless flurry of self-correcting exchanges, wikis, covering everything from politics and business plans to sports and science fiction subcultures, amass--and refine--information. Open-source software enables large numbers of people to participate in technological development. Prediction markets aggregate information in a way that allows companies, ranging from computer manufacturers to Hollywood studios, to make better decisions about product launches and office openings. Sunstein shows how people can assimilate aggregated information without succumbing to the dangers of the herd mentality--and when and why the new aggregation techniques are so astoundingly accurate. In a world where opinion and anecdote increasingly compete on equal footing with hard evidence, the on-line effort of many minds coming together might well provide the best path to infotopia.

Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages
Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (July 7, 2008)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0195340671
ISBN-13: 978-0195340679
Product Dimensions: 7.9 x 0.7 x 5.3 inches
Shipping Weight: 14.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)
Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 19 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #464,053 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #80 inÂ Books > Law > Media & the Law #85 inÂ Books > Law > Legal Theory & Systems > Science & Technology #746 inÂ Books > Business & Money > Management & Leadership > Information Management

Customer Reviews

"This extraordinary work synthesizes the latest in how we know, with the latest in what the web has become to map more compellingly than any other book the promise and risk of the information society. As with everything Sunstein writes, this beautiful and clear book has something to teach the experts, and lots to teach the rest of us."--Lawrence Lessig, author of Free Culture and The Future of Ideas"Infotopia is a persuasive and sophisticated meditation on the ways in which the Web is not just living up to its early hype, but transcending it. Cass Sunstein has given us a brilliant integrative view of how the distributed users of the Internet can band together to produce extraordinary work--along with the circumstances that best give rise to deliberation rather than groupthink."--Jonathan Zittrain, Professor of Internet Governance and Regulation, Oxford University"Cass Sunstein’s new book is a lively illustration of emerging mechanisms for collective rationality never anticipated in the classic writings of Madison, Marx, or Milton (Friedman). Neither a utopian nor a Luddite, Sunstein provides just the right mix of enthusiasm and caution. Ironically, in arguing for the tremendous potential of the group mind, Sunstein demonstrates a command of law, social science, and computer science rarely found in any individual author--and produces a very fun read."--Robert MacCoun, Professor of Public Policy and Law, University of California at Berkeley"In our knowledge-based world, extracting useful information from society is more important than ever. Sunstein convincingly reveals the limitations of popular processes like deliberation while showing how collectives--under certain conditions--can effectively solve many problems. An engaging read, full of eye-opening examples,Infotopia shows how and why our efforts to harness knowledge must evolve."--Michael J. Mauboussin, Chief Investment Strategist, Legg Mason Capital Management and author of More Than You Know: Finding Financial Wisdom in Unconventional Places"Sunstein, one of the biggest of America’s internet big thinkers, has written an intriguing new book in which he argues that Hayek’s insights about the genius of markets are equally true of the internet. Sunstein argues, for example, that sharing scientific information online would cure some of the worst problems of the US patent system and foster innovation much more efficiently than costly patent litigation. Sunstein recognizes all the potential flaws of such collaborative projects. Groupthink can be dangerous. But, says Sunstein, the wisdom of the many is a great thing, and sharing knowledge online can lead to remarkable advances for companies, for governments and for the rest of

us."--Patti Waldmeir, Financial Times"A survey of the evidence on how information technology affects political debate and institutional decision making. The result is a vivid, readable, and informative work of empiricist skepticism--a show-me-the-money guide to what soars and what stumbles from the stable of Internet dreams."--Jedediah Purdy, American Prospect, Duke University

Cass R. Sunstein is Karl N. Llewellyn Distinguished Service Professor of Jurisprudence at the University of Chicago Law School, a contributing editor at the New Republic and the American Prospect, and a frequent contributor as well to such publications as the New York Times and the Washington Post. He is the recipient of the Henderson Prize and the Goldsmith Book Prize; his many books include Radicals in Robes, Republic.com, Why Societies Need Dissent, and Designing Democracy: What Constitutions Do. He lives in Chicago, Illinois.

this is a good book. i understand that for experts there might be other books that are less "shallow." i am not one to judge whether this book is shallow or superb. I found it a useful book and i can use some of the principles that the author writes about. For me one of the most interesting points was to reconsider the glory and equity of consensus. Given a predilection (by me) to hippie ideas and rainbow gathering ideals of making decisions by consensus--enough information was provided for me to reconsider my own axiom that consensus is always good and decision by authorities bad. The author did not explicitly make that argument. His concern is with how information is used to make decisions and how the organization of decision makers can stifle or encourage important information to be heard and heeded and also to try and do away with one’s own identity lense in interpreting information. this is rather simple, perhaps shallow; but as Sunstein shows, without knowledgeable alternative voices who are listened to seriously, bad decisions are often made. Consensus is often gained through the implicit silencing of others by valorizing consensus and portraying those who disagree as malcontents, contrarians and the like. this book, for me, stands as a good corrective to that notion. It’s not a great book but its a good informative book for the general inquisitive reader

Even though this book is obviously written for a popular readership, it nevertheless seemed unduly superficial and somewhat fragmented. In my view, an academic with an endowed chair at a very prestigious university ought to produce a rather more substantive book than Infotopia, even if it is directed toward a popular market.At the outset, the Hayek quote in the preface about pooling extant knowledge struck me as profound and promising, so it piqued rather high expectations on my part.

Alas I did not encounter anything else very striking until the Conclusion. There, I very much liked the metaphor about the various scientific disciplines actually operating in the fashion of a wiki. To wit, all scientific knowledge and advances are provisional, and not merely subject to later revision, but instead assured of subsequent amendment or extensions by those with valid new discoveries/insights.Clearly, there were some interesting notions/concepts introduced, web-based success stories described, and fascinating anecdotes recounted in this book. Although the caliber of writing was fine (organization excepted), the book on balance contained too much in the way of hype, platitudes, and arguable third-party contentions. Overall, neither a coherent message nor general findings/lessons materialized, at least with any notable impact or sense of closure. In fairness to the author, he deserves credit for emphasizing assumptions that are prerequisites for the proper use of certain of the described information aggregation-enrichment techniques.In all, my disappointment with this book really surprised me. As I read it, I kept thinking that the content just had to improve. Instead, I relearned the lesson to beware of a book written on a topic outside the authorÃ¢Â Â™s particular area of expertise.

this book, as its subtitle indicates, is about the production of knowledge by many minds. but the book is less about the fact that many minds produce knowledge than about the ways in which information that is dispersed among many minds can be accessed and the conditions under which those varying methods work best. under discussion are surveys/polls, deliberation, markets, wikis, open source software, and blogs.so, for instance, he starts off the book talking about the surprising ways in which large groups of people can outperform individuals when answers are averaged out. often the average answer -- when guessing the weight of some object, when trying to correlate body weight with gender -- is not only better than the best individual answer, but also better than what a supposed expert can offer. to be sure, aggregating information like this only works under specific conditions, say, when it is reasonable to presume that people might have a general idea about something. it would be useless to rely on the statistical responses of people for information not privy to most people, say, the year of some lesser known historical event or the name of someone’s pet (unless that someone is famous, maybe).the reason that this works, Sunstein explains, is due to the Condorcet Jury Theorem, which states that the probability of arriving at a correct answer increases as the size of the group increases provided that there is greater than a 50% chance that people will arrive at a correct answer. the more people you have, the closer you approach to 100%. this is the reason why "ask the audience" usually works well in Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? -- because there’s a decent chance that some people know the answer, or at least can correctly rule out false

answers. in these types of situations, it is beneficial to rely on the responses of a large group of people (as large as possible, in fact) to increase the chances of arriving at the correct answer.the flip side of this math, however, is that if people have less than a 50% chance of knowing the correct answer -- again, when asking about information not widely disseminated -- the probability of arriving at the correct responses approaches 0% as the group increases. so clearly this isn't always (or even often) the best way of arriving at the truth.the second method under review is deliberation. Sunsstein is open about giving deliberation a bad rap here not because it is entirely inefficient, but because it is so often assumed to be the ideal way of accessing dispersed information and thus the truth. deliberation lies at the heart of many practices in this country, from trials by jury to our deliberative democracy. the problem with deliberation, in short, is that it doesn't work very well. Sunstein offers a number of reasons for this, owing to some of the natural shortcomings of the human mind (some familiar terrain after reading Kluge) and to particular behavioral phenomena in group settings, such as the general "groupthink" idea, along with informational cascades (when people factor into their responses the likelihood that other people, who may hold a different opinion, would be wrong and so answer or vote not purely on the basis of information but on what everyone else appears to know as well) and the many pressures on individuals to preserve group harmony (or their own status) by not offering information they may have that goes against the conventional group wisdom. in experiments, people also tend to accord more authority to people in higher positions (including class, gender, and race -- even if those social statuses are irrelevant to the immediate context) and to ignore others, regardless of the value of the information.in one particularly illuminating example, the author discusses an experiment in which individuals of a group are asked to vote for candidates in an imaginary election. the experiment is set up in such a way that Candidate A is clearly the most fit choice for the position. when group members are all given about 2/3 of the relevant information for the candidates, the deliberation usually results in the correct choice of Candidate A (a statistical improvement over the initial poll of individuals -- so here, deliberation helped). however, when the members are all given 2/3 of the information about the other candidates, and the information about Candidate A is dispersed among individual members (even if the total information is more than in the previous scenario), the groups fail to access the relevant information contained by some of its members. as a result, they end up choosing one of the demonstrably inferior candidates. moreover, the percentage of votes for Candidate A fell after deliberation. why? because the information favoring the wrong candidate is that which is held by all the members -- a phenomenon aptly called "the common knowledge effect."the major concern here is that deliberation groups often fail to access the relevant information held by some of its members

because of the tendency to favor (and focus on) information shared by all rather than on individual perspectives, even when there was no evident (or stronger than usual) "status" issues or instances of social pressure on conforming to group opinion (indeed, there was no group opinion until the hypothetical information was given out). in other experiments, the success of deliberation groups was also dependent on whether the group members were "primed" to think that arriving at the correct answer was important, as opposed to priming them for getting along. this is cold comfort when thinking of juries and governmental deliberation.this is not to say, however, that deliberation never works -- obviously it worked in the first part of the experiment. indeed, deliberation groups can perform as well as their best member, and sometimes they can even outperform their best member when pieces of relevant information are dispersed and the information, together, helps the group arrive at the correct answer. but deliberation is best limited to instances when an answer is readily available (like problem solving) or "eureka" problems -- when the correct answer can be identified by all as soon as it is made apparent. on more ambiguous matter -- say on social or moral issues, or anything involving ideology of whatever sort -- deliberation groups are fairly terrible, often resulting in the amplification of previous biases (a well-documented event, familiar to anyone who's ever been in a chat room or on a message board -- or even among a group of like-minded friends, really).Sunstein then moves on to markets -- prediction markets, more specifically. on the general level, the author discusses why online review sites (of movies, restaurants, products, etc.) have worked so well on the principle of a market and the establishing of a "price" of a particular commodity. but what is most interesting is his discussion of more recent developments of prediction markets in which people place value (and trade stock) on the likelihood of a certain outcome -- say, the winners of Oscars or the results of a political election. surprisingly, these "markets" have often (but not always) outperformed even the best experts in their predictions. the reasons why these markets work is that they provide an incentive for people with good information to put their money where their mouth is, resulting in predictions made by people who, in theory at least, have relevant information. if you are concerned, as the author is, with how we most efficiently go about accessing widely dispersed information in society, then markets are often an excellent way of bypassing some of the social pressures and dynamics of deliberation groups. these don't always have to be (indeed, they often aren't) open to the public and so can limit the predictions and trading to the relevant individuals. so far, these types of markets have proved excellent within individual companies (e.g., Google and HP) at predicting what products will be the most successful or when a new product or program will be ready for distribution. this new approach undermines conventional wisdom of a board of big wigs -- who couldn't possibly have access to all of the relevant information possessed

by all the employees -- making the decision from the top down.to keep the rest of this brief(er), Sunstein then moves on to the various Web 2.0 developments in social media and information aggregation -- including wikis, open source software, and blogs -- and discusses their relative merits, as well as causes for concern. as it turns out, unmediated forums for the sharing and refining of information have proved more effective than many feared. that is not to say there are not problems with, say, wikis -- indeed, Wikipedia is far better on some topics than others, and even then usually as a general guide, not the end-all authority -- or blogs -- here we can find some pretty terrible groupthink behavior, along with more than generous helpings of rubbish -- but overall, they are very effective in ensuring that dispersed information sees the figurative light of day. in fact, Sunstein discusses a few instances where information shared online by bloggers helped to correct statements made by political candidates (leading to apologies) or to debunk a phony document (leading Dan Rather to apologize and retire).the book ends with a few discussions about the situations in which the various methods work best and a few suggestions about how groups and organizations can best make use of them.overall, this is a very interesting book and fascinating information. unfortunately, for even such a short book (225 pages), it was more repetitive than necessary and could have benefited from more individual case studies. also, while I am tempted to say that this book is to groups what Gary Marcus' Kluge is for the individual mind, this book is not nearly as entertaining and engaging as Marcus', which is unfortunate because it certainly had the potential to be as captivating and perhaps even more relevant.

Young Patient, and the Past-Life Therapy That Changed Both Their Lives So Many Circles, So Many Squares Many Lives, Many Masters: The True Story of a Psychiatrist, His Young Patient, and Past-Life Therapy Many Lives, Many Masters: The True Story of a Prominent Psychiatrist, His Yo Orthopaedic Knowledge Update: Foot and Ankle 4 (Orthopedic Knowledge Update) The New Edge in Knowledge: How Knowledge Management Is Changing the Way We Do Business The Knowledge Manager's Handbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Embedding Effective Knowledge Management in your Organization The Fun Knowledge Encyclopedia: The Crazy Stories Behind the World's Most Interesting Facts (Trivia Bill's General Knowledge) (Volume 1)