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## Editorial

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# Information research, practice, and education continue to invite and benefit from philosophy

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It has become easy to make a case for the relevance, richness, and importance of philosophical thinking for information research and practice. The information professions regularly encounter previously unknown and unimagined relations between people and information, and information research very often touches upon the outer boundaries of science and the humanities. Both cases solicit philosophical thinking: the former frequently requires deep, critical thinking about what our relationship to information is and can be, with considerable consequences for the future of human kind and the planet, and the latter invites the same kind of thinking when our assumptions and views are shown to be insufficiently clear to allow confident conclusions and the generation of further knowledge. These domains also *support* philosophical thinking by providing new examples of philosophical concepts in action, inviting scholars to amend our views and definitions so that they match the information community's perceptions of the world and gain further practical utility.

A similar relationship exists between philosophy and information education. Newly-enrolled students in information science (IS) programs have the benefit of casting fresh eyes on the state of knowledge in various subfields in IS, and so quickly identify the limits of our understanding along various important topics. This often manifests when they begin asking difficult questions in the lecture hall; though the courses in such programs are mainly focused on skill mastery, many unaddressed societal, ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical issues lurk in the background, and students ask about, for example, the nature of information and its relationship to facts, knowledge, and propaganda; the digital divide and the right to information access; the implications of data collection, Web tracking, and the right to be forgotten. These are just a few common examples, each of which has been debated in scholarly literature, and the ties of information to philosophy extend into every subdomain of IS [1].

Such questions are difficult to answer – whether posed in class or in scholarly journals – in part because the concepts are complex, requiring wide and careful reading if one hopes to attempt an informed response. One could easily become lost in or intimidated by the wealth of such literature; looking only to Martens's introductory

review [2] and Tomic's examination of the role of philosophy in IS [1] one can find roughly two hundred relevant papers, and at least two special issues of IS journals focusing on philosophical topics predate this one. There has also been sustained philosophical activity at IS conferences, for example at a panel at the ASIS&T's 2013 annual meeting and at a round table discussion at the 2009 iConference.

The corpus resulting from such work rivals in size that of any subdomain in IS, and is produced by a group of authors as widely spread as this topic, including those in information departments of various flavours (science, studies, management, informatics) and philosophy departments – and in some cases both simultaneously through cross-appointment – and libraries and other institutions across Canada, the US, the UK, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and many other countries. They may be primarily philosophers, or information scientists, historians, economists, computer scientists, technologists, communication scholars, cultural theorists, sociologists, or roboticists, but nonetheless produce philosophical work pertinent to information.

Not only are there many papers to digest, but the topics covered also require crystal clarity to explain and teach effectively, typically requiring a deep understanding of the content. This can be challenging as the findings of such works are rarely conclusive, but this is never the goal of philosophical thinking, and would not be a reasonable one for such large questions. Rather, they refine our understanding of concepts fundamental to the information society, which are so often slippery and problematic.

The works in this special issue are examples of this *conceptual refining* from well-known information scholars, comprising timely and sharp contributions to understanding information and education. First, Raphael Capurro and Maximiliano Rodríguez Fleitas report on state- and citizen-run education and information access and literacy initiatives in Uruguay, and their historical and social contexts, producing a phenomenological analysis of the initiatives' implications for libraries and their communities. In the second piece, Robert M. Losee provides an accessible introduction to information theory, one of the pillars of IS, including explaining its history, basic concepts, and philosophical and applied antecedents, and suggesting relevant readings; this should aid educators and students alike.

Third, Betsy Van der Veer Martens puts forth a lucid discussion of how Floridi's idea of *information ethics*, which proposes an ethical framework for our information-heavy world, could be used to ground and support common IS values, such as those motivating preservation. Finally, Jonathan Furner demarcates an area of study called *philosophy of data* and explicates its relations to IS and other relevant fields, thus identifying the potential theoretical substrate for some of the greatest issues of our time.

## References

- [1] Tomic T. The Philosophy of Information as an Underlying and Unifying Theory of Information Science. *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal*. 2010 Dec; 15(4): n4.
- [2] Van der Veer Martens B. An illustrated introduction to the Infosphere. *Library Trends*. 2015; 63(3): 317-61.