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#### Tooling Around in the IBM InfoSphere

by Vincent McBurney (Deloitte Manager)

The blog dedicated to a tool based approach to data integration with news and tips on IBM InfoSphere, Informatica, Oracle, ...more

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#### Professor Luciano Floridi on the Philosophy of the Infosphere

Vincent McBurney (Deloitte Manager) posted 4/8/2008 | [Comments](#) (2)

A few weeks ago IBM launched a new super software brand called InfoSphere. Today it was my good fortune to get some feedback from a notable Professor on the philosophy of the Infosphere.

InfoSphere is a new super brand in IBM covering software from several product families: DB2, Information Management, WebSphere just to name a few. These products are brought together to create a software package for complex information management tasks. The InfoSphere MDM Server, InfoSphere Risk and Fraud Warehouse and the InfoSphere Balanced Warehouses are some of the first product bundles.

I wrote about many other uses of the word infosphere in my blog post [Look up in the sky! It's not WebSphere, it's not the Information Server, it's an InfoSphere!](#) I found it has been used by the Department of Defence, by an author, an Australian IT company and the TV show Futurama. I did miss a couple, a line in the classic Japanese Anime film *Ghost in the Shell* and a lyric by Canadian group Water on Mars. Now I have the most authoritative definition of the term. It may not be the first use of the term but this definition is described in peer reviewed academic journals, it is evolved from another related term, it makes sense and he's a professor. I think that outranks a television script writer by a small margin.

Professor Luciano Floridi has some impressive credentials. He is the Research Chair in Philosophy of Information at the University of Hertfordshire. He is a Fellow of St Cross College, University of Oxford. He is the President of the International Association for Computing and Philosophy. Of course his greatest achievement of all is that he has a blog, [Philosophy of Information](#). Oh and he has his [own Wikipedia page](#). You can get more details in his paper [A look into the future impact of ICT on our lives](#), *The Information Society*, 2007, 23.1, 59-64. An abridged and modified version was published in [TidBITS](#).

So here are the questions I sent him and his answers.

*What does Infosphere mean to you?*

Infosphere has essentially two meanings.

One is static and not very interesting, as it roughly corresponds to "cyberspace". This "infosphere" (small i meant) is the totality of informational agents and objects, services, relations, processes as well as the space within which they interact. It is a wider concept than "cyberspace" but only because it includes offline and analogue domains

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as well, like the books in a library or the shopping list attached to the fridge in the kitchen; otherwise, it is not particularly innovative.

The second meaning is far more interesting. According to it, *InfoSphere* (capital I) is synonymous with the whole reality. It is a way of referring to what there is, by adopting an informational perspective. This means equating the Infosphere to what philosophers call Being (again, capital B meant). *InfoSphere* is a very powerful concept. It means having a unified vocabulary to talk about DNA, computers, physical particles, avatars, social environments, humans, companies or webbots as agents, interactions as forms of communication, biosphere, ecosphere and cyberspace, and so forth.

So one should differentiate between infosphere and Infosphere. My work has been mainly on the Infosphere. With these two terms, we can understand, for example, how the infosphere may still be based on the dualism online-offline, whereas the Infosphere equates online with onlife, if you allow me this other neologism. Again, Web 2.0 or Semantic Web applications belong to the Infosphere, not the infosphere. The examples could easily be multiplied.

*Did you coin this term or hear it from another source?*

I suspect I might have coined the term, as I do not recall borrowing it from another source, but I'm happy to acknowledge any previous ownership. Good ideas tend to live in more than one mind. The point is not so much the word, but the concepts behind it. And as far as those are concerned, I believe to have been the first to point in the direction of the equation  $\text{Infosphere} = \text{Reality}$ . After Newton, we have become used to talk about the universe in physical terms. We are now switching to an informational ontology, whereby matter and energy are seen as expressions of the Infosphere. This is the really interesting point behind the neologism.

*Do you think Infosphere is going to become a commonly used term like internet or ecosphere?*

I hope so. The more we move from the infosphere to the Infosphere, the more people will find it useful to have a word to refer to their experiences. Take our understanding of the information society. This is such that geographical, cultural or linguistic barriers are no longer very meaningful. The gap is rather between insiders and outsiders (the so-called digital divide) and this is so because the information society is made possible by the Infosphere. Every day, the Infosphere becomes wider and more encompassing.

*How do you feel about IBM turning infosphere into a product brand name?*

This is perfectly fine. What matters most is the conceptual frame behind the term, the new ontology I sketched above. Now, if IBM were to adopt that without any acknowledgment then I would be disappointed. It is a matter of courtesy and scientific scholarship to acknowledge one's sources. But I doubt IBM will be interested in the philosophy of the Infosphere.

*Do you think InfoSphere MDM Server end users could be called inforgs?*

Yes, although not because they are users of that IBM product but, rather, because they are likely to be the sort of people to whom that kind of product would appeal. In other words, it is because they are inforgs (informational organisms) that they will be likely to use the InfoSphere MDM Server and other similar products, not vice versa. By the way, I just checked and, apparently, the only entry *inforg* on Wikipedia is in Portuguese (<http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inforg>). Odd. There used to be one in English, but it has disappeared. The Infosphere can be a rather hostile environment for new-comers, sometimes 8-) Anyone interested in some wiki-editing?

*Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are my own personal opinions and do not represent my employer's view in any way.*

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[KateMartin](#) writes:

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Professor Luciano and readers of this blog may be interested to know that the first documented use of the word infosphere listed in the Oxford English Dictionary is from a 1971 book review in Time Magazine. It also was used in Toffler's 1980 book, *Third Wave*.

The review is at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,905004,00.html>, and is of a novel called *The Sweetmeat Saga: Epic Story of the Sixties*. The opening paragraph of the review reads,

In much the way that fish cannot conceptualize water or birds the air, man barely understands his infosphere, that encircling layer of electronic and typographical smog composed of cliches from journalism, entertainment, advertising and government. Gravenson, a writer of TV commercials, undoubtedly has contributed more than his share of pollutant. But with a little help from his friends (he claims to have written his novel under the influence of marijuana), he seems to have hovered above the infosphere long enough for an entertaining and satirical look.



[Vincent McBurney](#) writes:

6/4/2009 #

Thankyou - that is some fantastic feedback. This should be the earliest documented use of the term. It's interesting hearing Graverson use the term InfoSphere "hovered above the infosphere" long before the internet and our concept of massive continual connectivity and personal gadgets like smart phones and iPhones. He was referring an electronic and typographical smog and I'd say it's ten times thicker today.

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