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INTRODUCTION

Toni Weller

INFORMATION HISTORY

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, information has become increasingly commonplace: an everyday commercial and cultural commodity, ubiquitous in our daily lives. The idea of information has taken on a new importance and value. Theorists such as Frank Webster, Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas have discussed the notion of our contemporary world as an ‘information society’, as information has become recognized ‘as a distinguishing feature of the modern world’.

The issues of the information age surround us in public debate, in political discourse and in cultural considerations: the ‘surveillance state’, personal privacy, information design, the collection of information, information access and information dissemination, amongst many other issues.

From the late 1990s there has emerged a train of historical thought which questions the origins of these themes; asking to what extent they are a product of this new information age, and to what extent they are age-old debates brought into popular focus by the new emphasis on all things ‘information’.

Such a line of thinking also has also begun to challenge the way we think of information historically. Hobart and Schiffman suggested in 2000 that to a society immersed in information, ‘the claim that information once did not exist, that it has a history, sounds absurd’. However, until the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars had not explored the idea of information historically at all. The old adage that the present affects the way we study the past, or, more to the point, that present issues can influence what we deem important to study about the past, has proved itself to be as true as ever. In previous generations, the 1960s witnessed a new historiography of crime following social challenges to the establishment after the Second World War. The 1970s saw an interest in
women in history when the dominant issue of the day was feminism. Likewise, the late 1990s and 2000s have seen a new exploration of the multifarious roles, uses and meanings of information in past societies, emerging from our contemporary fascination with information debates and concerns. As Peter Burke has argued, ‘we should not be too quick to assume that our age is the first to take these questions [of information] seriously’. This ‘information turn’ in scholarly thinking forms the basis of this collection of essays.

The book attempts to draw some of this work together; to explore information in the context of the history of the modern world; and to suggest some alternate histories of the contemporary information age. The contributors to this book do not suggest any kind of inevitable Whiggish progression towards ‘the information age’; rather, they explore the concept of information in a variety of historical contexts. The chapters in this volume are discrete histories in their own right, but they are drawn together by a common historiography of information. A recent review of the literature of information history over the past decade suggested that such scholarship has two key features in common:

The first is an overt and explicit recognition that the historical study of information adds a new perspective to more traditional histories, that they complement each other, but that the information discourse is something new. This is definitely a phenomenon of the last ten to fifteen years... The second is a sense, from the authors, that they are in some way contributing to a bigger picture, building up a new chronology and historiography of information, that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

These commonalities can be applied to each of the chapters of this book. As individual studies they are fascinating; as a whole they offer a bigger picture of how the history of information can challenge our understandings of the modern information age, and add other perspectives to more established historical discourses.

Consequently, these chapters do not define or differentiate between information, knowledge, facts, wisdom or any other variants on the theme. There has been a great deal of literature on how these ideas should be defined, particularly within the library and information-science community, but such definitions can be counterproductive in historical studies. In fact, the need to define information explicitly in this way is a recent development of the information age. As research into nineteenth-century Britain has shown, past societies did not feel the need to differentiate between such concepts, and we should not impose definitions upon the past. Information is heterogeneous. It ‘is multifaceted, so...multiple definitions apply concurrently’. The multiple definitions that
information has been afforded in recent decades are a good example of the ‘language game’ of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in which the meaning of a word should be identified by the way in which it is used, rather than by any single definition. In this book therefore, the concept of information is defined and explored in relation to the specific historical context of each chapter, which changes according to focus and historical interpretation. This is not so much a grand narrative; it is a grand perspective.

**THE MODERN WORLD**

The chronology of information history in the modern world does require some definition, however. The idea of modernity is complex, usually associated with the rise of nationalism and empire, capitalism, secularization and the growth of the state. Such associations mean that the concept of the ‘modern’ world tends to be dated from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, although others have posited its origins much earlier or much later. Whilst there is no chronological restriction on the historical study of information – recent studies have explored information in the Roman Empire and in early modern Japan and Europe, for example – this volume focuses on the era of the post-Enlightenment and post-industrial world from 1750 onwards. This era witnessed critical changes in scientific and cultural thinking and experience which had profound consequences for the way in which information was perceived and used within society.

Politically, the second half of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth saw huge changes to the established order. In America, the War of Independence in the late 1770s and the Civil War almost a century later helped to establish the United States as a new political player. The revolution of 1789 in France and the subsequent revolutionary wars sent tremors throughout Europe which were still being felt in the revolutions of 1848. Both American and French conflicts emphasized the idea of liberties, civil rights and freedom of expression. Access and dissemination of information took on greater significance. Whilst largely stifled in the immediate aftermath by the reactionary conservative governments of Europe, more liberal ideals associated with Enlightenment traditions began to emerge in the salons and coffee houses of the West as well as through informal information exchanges. Publications such as *Tatler* put down coffee houses as their editorial addresses, and different locations specialized in different types of information: political, shipping, society or economic.

It was not just coffee houses that utilized the liberal ideas of expression. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a tremendous growth in
print culture throughout the world. This was the era of the periodical and the newspaper, aided by the application of steam technology to printing and the abolition of taxes on paper.\(^\text{17}\) Most cities in Europe had their own publications. Cheap ‘penny magazines’, based on the original *Penny Magazine* in England, were aimed at the new working classes, and had wide distribution in both Europe and America. The movements for education and political reform questioned to what extent the masses should have access to ‘useful’ information, pointing to the dangers of an informed radical mass.\(^\text{18}\) The revolutionary decades of 1780 to 1820 saw much state censorship of the radical press throughout Europe, but this did not prevent the growth of cheap publications which drew attention to the political and social issues of the day.\(^\text{19}\) Books were published on topics of all kinds, from science and geography to music, history and art. Education became a popular subject for books, following John Locke’s influential essay of 1693, *Some Thought Concerning Education*, reprinted in numerous editions throughout the nineteenth century.\(^\text{20}\) By the early twentieth century state-provided formal education had become the norm, and literacy rates rose accordingly.

Not only were more books, periodicals and newspapers being published than ever before, but the communications revolution meant that information could be shared much more quickly and effectively. Throughout Europe and North America the number of railway lines soared during the mid-nineteenth century, carrying passengers, publications – and ideas – with them. The telegraph, telephone and postal systems helped to communicate and disseminate information, with the technological developments of the latter twentieth century allowing unprecedented democratization and access to information via digital technologies and the internet.\(^\text{21}\) Such openness and dissemination brought their own problems, and issues of theft, censorship and transgression arose. Criminals utilized new communication and information technologies just as much as they had done with earlier technologies and tools.\(^\text{22}\) Dissention could be communicated just as easily as acquiescence.

By the late nineteenth century the growth of imperialism and colonial conflict was creating new tensions and uncertainties on a global scale, which escalated through the two world wars of the twentieth century. Political tensions reached their peak in the Cold War between the capitalist West and the communist East from the 1950s, only to be succeeded by new forms of terrorism through the 1980s and on into the twenty-first century.\(^\text{23}\) This post-9/11 environment has given rise to an ongoing ‘information war’ about who controls opinion and propaganda most effectively.\(^\text{24}\) Habermas’ informed public sphere of the nineteenth century has arguably become a global arena for control of
information. Information then, in all its variety of manifestations, has played an important role in the modern world.

The word ‘information’ was not new to the late eighteenth century. Its etymological origin stemmed from the Middle Ages, where it was derived from the medieval Latin *informationem* and old French *enformacion*, meaning ‘formation of the mind, or teaching’. However, although the word had been in use for several centuries, the 1800s witnessed a shift in the way people, in the West at least, understood, conceptualized and used information. For Neil Postman, ‘the eighteenth century generated a tumult of new information; along with new media through which information [was] communicated’.27

More specifically, it was not just that new information was available but, more significantly, that for the first time people began to view information as a category in its own right. There was a profound shift in conceptual understanding during the nineteenth century. Information was no longer a ‘rhetorical instrument’ used to convince, persuade or inform, but instead became divorced from content and specific purpose. For Postman, this was intrinsically linked to the new technologies of industrialization: the telegraph, telephone and photograph each allowed the isolation of information, and its separation from the earlier traditions of information content, persuasion and rhetoric. However, such a conceptual shift should not be located entirely within changes in technology. Ronald Day has argued that language and political agency have also influenced such changing perceptions, and that the growth of bureaucracy and documentation in the late nineteenth century introduced a modern culture of information. I have argued elsewhere that the technological processes and tools of the post-1750 period were only part of the story, and that the social and cultural acceptance of information raised nascent questions of personal and public information personas; of visual information; and of the collection and display of information artefacts. During the nineteenth century then, there was a shift from pre-modern to modern understandings of information. Information was discussed explicitly as an idea, as a concept, rather than forming a more implicit part of education or polemic. There was not just a move towards the modern world from 1750 in terms of bureaucracy, nationalism, politics and so forth; there was also a move towards a more recognizably modern way of conceptualizing information. The chapters of this book focus on the period during this shift. The modern world, so far as this volume is concerned, is not just linked to the traditional discourses of the Enlightenment and industrialization. It argues that alongside this broader historical context from 1750, we can also see early traces of the modern conceptual values and the ubiquitous nature of information that have now become so evident in our own contemporary society.
Following on from this argument, there are two exceptions to the general post-1750 emphasis of the book. In Chapter 2 Edward Higgs explores personal identification in England in the five centuries since 1500, but he argues that there were very modern concerns with identity and trust which necessitated ‘the development of forms of personal identification based on the storage and retrieval of information’. The majority of the chapter deals with the post-industrial period from 1750 onwards, but in this context modern concerns over personal privacy can be identified much earlier than the industrial revolution.

The second exception to the general post-1750 emphasis is Chapter 3, in which W. Boyd Rayward discusses the lives of four men in mid-seventeenth-century France and England. He argues that the protagonists ‘were actively participating in a pre-modern information society that was on the cusp of the enormous changes that were to usher in our modern world and create the information infrastructures that support it’. His chapter offers a glimpse of what was happening on the very edge of the nascent modern information world.

**CONTRIBUTING CHAPTERS**

The chapters follow a roughly chronological order, although there is a degree of temporal overlap between them. This introductory chapter offers some background to the field of information history and attempts to set the contextual scene for the chapters that follow. In Chapter 2, ‘Personal Identification as Information Flows in England, 1500–2000’, Edward Higgs examines the ways in which identification and the body are turned into information in database systems and communicated around the world. He provides a grand narrative of identity and personal information flows since 1500, challenging the accepted notion that the pre-industrialized world was based on trust and recognition. He argues that the nineteenth-century development of credit rating agencies, and anthropometric and fingerprinting systems of identification which were intended to be communicated down telegraph lines, developed themes and concerns which were already long-established, and that the role of warfare and welfare during the twentieth century continued this tradition. Although the focus of the chapter is on England, there are arguably parallels to be made with continental Europe and North America.

Boyd Rayward continues the theme of information flows and networks in Chapter 3, ‘Information for the Public: Information Infrastructure in the Republic of Letters’. He discusses the interlinking case studies of four men
involved in the intellectual development of Europe during the seventeenth century through the Republic of Letters – Théophraste Renaudot, Gabriel Naudé, Samuel Hartlib and John Dury. He argues that the history of how societies, in times of violent and far-reaching social and political change, such as the period covered by this chapter, struggle to manage the information on which their security and identity to a large extent depend, is critical to our understanding of our own information age. During a period of profound political and social disturbances in the mid-seventeenth century new social and institutional practices of managing information became central to the way information was communicated. The information impact of war, instability and threat discussed here in relation to mid-seventeenth-century France and England are also evident in other chapters discussing Britain between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, and in twentieth-century Africa (see Chapters 2, 4, 6 and 8).

In Chapter 4, ‘Designing and Gathering Information: Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century Forms’, Paul Stiff, Paul Dobraszczyk and Mike Esbester explore the notions of information design during the nineteenth century, using the ephemera of material printed forms to show the impact on state interaction and contemporary discourses of information-gathering. They discuss the importance of historical information design, using examples of the administrative tax and census form to conclude that there was a conceptual shift in the way citizens read and wrote information through official state documents. They argue that while the state demanded compliance in the completion of such forms, citizens often either refused, or were unable to comply with, such conformity. Building on the ideas expressed by Edward Higgs in Chapter 2, Stiff et al. offer a more subtle interpretation of the collection of information on individuals, and its socio-cultural impact.

Laura Skouvig takes a look at the impact of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrialization in Denmark in Chapter 5, ‘Broadside Ballads, Almanacs and the Illustrated News: Genres and Rhetoric in the Communication of Information in Denmark 1800–1925’. She offers a view from the peasant classes, and describes the ways in which they used and disseminated information. More specifically, she asks what the media landscape looked like and how it worked as the channel for dispersing information during the long nineteenth century in Denmark. She explores how the need for information was defined and how information was dispersed through the medium of the broadside ballad. This offers an interesting comparison with other chapters which focus on Britain during this period, particularly with those by Paul Stiff et al. and Alistair Black (Chapters 4 and 7) which engage with cultural information and information design.
Moving more fully into the twentieth century, Dave Muddiman offers a case history of the Imperial Institute in London in Chapter 6, ‘Information and Empire: The Information and Intelligence Bureaux of the Imperial Institute, London, 1887–1949’. He argues that information played a key role in nationalism and imperialism, from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, in the development of the information-intensive societies we recognize today. As demonstrated by the chapters of Edward Higgs, Boyd Rayward, Paul Stiff et al. and Paul Sturges (Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 8), the rhetoric of the information state seems to become more powerful in periods of conflict or threat, when it is intrinsically linked to information culture and discourse.

Alistair Black looks at the development of information management during the first half of the twentieth century in Chapter 7. In ‘A Valuable Handbook of Information: The Staff Magazine in the First Half of the Twentieth Century as a Means of Information Management’, he argues that the origins of managing information can be found in the early company magazine rather than in the advent of the microprocessor and the internet. Complementing the chapters by Laura Skouvig and Paul Stiff et al. (Chapters 4 and 5), Black’s account shows the significance of the way information is presented and managed visually through cultural mediums.

In Chapter 8, ‘Modelling Recent Information History: The “Banditry” of the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda’, Paul Sturges uses information history as a tool to re-examine military conflicts, focusing on Ugandan liberation struggles dating from the 1980s as information wars. Contrary to views which present such tensions as battles over political or economic power, Sturges argues that it is information which is the dominant currency. He concludes that his graphical model of an information conflict could be usefully applied to contexts much broader than political liberation struggles; anywhere in fact where there is competition and discord between factions. Although the majority of information history research is currently dominated by Western scholars or subjects (mostly due to the relative youth of the field), there is no reason why it should remain so as the field expands. Indeed, modernity is not synonymous with Westernization, and its key processes and dynamics can be found in all societies.34 This chapter provides an interesting contrast to the information histories of the Western world.

In the penultimate chapter, ‘Rewriting History: The Information Age and the Knowable Past’, Luke Tredinnick brings us right up to the contemporary present, exploring how the mutability of digital records and the participatory nature of digital discourse are changing the relationship between the recorded past and lived present, drawing on postmodern historiography around the
nature of writing and text. Tredinnick argues that information history offers a way of rethinking both the nature of history and our relationship with the past, in an era which is more ephemeral and ontologically unstable than ever before. In Chapter 9 we witness a full circle from the conceptual shifts towards information during the nineteenth century discussed above, from pre-modern to modern, to perhaps a more subtle postmodern view of information discourse in the twenty-first century.

In the concluding chapter, ‘Information History in the Modern World’, I attempt to bring together some of the broader themes emerging from the rest of the book. This chapter explores the ideas of identity, the management and control of information, surveillance, conflict, the information state, information design and challenges to the way we view the information age more holistically, drawing on the previous chapters for examples. I argue that despite differences in temporal and geographical emphasis, there is a great deal of consistency in the arguments presented on the historical study of information in the modern world. By presenting this collection of essays together in one volume, a new collective picture of information history emerges.

A FINAL THOUGHT

The subtitle of this book is Histories of the Information Age. The plural is significant. There is no single history of information; as with any historical subject, it is open to a range of definitions and contextual interpretation. The information turn which emerged at the end of the 1990s, and has continued to gain momentum, suggests a richness of unexplored avenues. As contemporary concerns and debates about information continue to flux, information history offers a way of exploring and reflecting our own shifting attitudes to information and the information society. I argued in a recent article on the changing historiography of information between 2000 and 2009 that we can trace ‘a shift in how historical understandings of information have changed; from technological to political to a cultural emphasis’ as the decade has progressed, but which have all retained a commonality of purpose and overview. The chapters in this volume, while eclectic in their subject matter, also share a consistent intent and justification: to contribute to a bigger information discourse.

It is hoped that this collection of essays will act as an introduction to these bigger themes and historiographical developments. Information history has many facets, and the chapters here showcase just some of them: the information state, information collection, identification, personal privacy, information
design, public and private information, and information culture. Each chapter has comprehensive bibliographical notes which suggest further readings in these areas and others. By all means read the chapters as individual articles, but also read them as part of a larger and more subtle discourse of information history.

NOTES


12. For more discussion on defining information in relation to historical context see Black, ‘Information and Modernity, pp. 39–45; Weller, Information History; Weller, Information History: An Introduction; Weller, The Victorians and Information.


14. S. Toulmin (1990), Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity (New York: Free Press) offers the argument that modernity could begin as early as the fifteenth century, or as late as the second half of the twentieth century.


12 Information History in the Modern World


27. Postman, Information, p. 82.


30. Weller, The Victorians and Information.

31. For more on the shift from pre-modern to modern conceptualizations of information see Weller, The Victorians and Information.

32. Chapter 2, this volume.

33. Chapter 3, this volume.


35. Weller, An Information History Decade, p. 95.
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