Systems of information: The long view.

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Systems of Information: The Long View

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Abstract

In response to the perceived (by some) onset of an information society, historians have begun to study its roots and antecedents. The past is replete with the rise, fall, and transformation of *systems of information*, which are not to be confused with the narrower computer-mediated world of *information systems*. The history of systems of information—which for digestibility can be labeled *information history*—lacks neither scale nor scope. Systems of information have played a critical role in the transition to, and subsequent development of, capitalism; the growth of the state, especially the modern, nation-state; the rise of modernity, science, and the public sphere; imperialism; and geopolitics. In the context of these epochal shifts and episodes in human thinking and social organization, this essay presents a critical bibliographic survey of histories—outside the well-trodden paths of library and information-science history—that have foregrounded, or made reference to, a wide variety of systems of information.

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Theorizing "Systems of Information" History

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at," said Oscar Wilde (1905 [1891], p. 40), "for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing." Historians, however, are usually uneasy about deliberately landing on the shores of Utopia. The hype that has formed the landscape of the information revolution and its information-society hinterland has mostly failed to spark visceral celebrations among historians, whose primary concern is, of course, the past, not the future. It is true that for some who have chosen to examine the antecedents and prehistory of the information age, simple, linear expla-

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