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## Information: A Historical Companion Book Review

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### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Tunon for encouragement and feedback.

### About Author

Lena Hernandez is a GLAM professional with over a decade of experience in museums and libraries.

**Blair, A., Duguid, P., Goeing, A.-S., & Grafton, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Information: A historical companion*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691209746>**

*Information: A Historical Companion* is a reference book that explores the history of information and the numerous ways that it has been created, documented, organized, shared, and stored. The book was edited by Ann Blair (Harvard University), Paul Duguid (University of California, Berkeley), Anja-Silvia Goeing (University of Zurich and Harvard University) and Anthony Grafton (Princeton University). At 904 pages, including the index and introduction, this tome is not meant for a casual read, though the editors have tried to create a book that is accessible to both academic and lay audiences. At its heart, *Information* seeks to demonstrate that rather than the “Information Age” being a distinct and new modern era of time, information has been a critical and growing field for centuries. The writers and editors make a convincing case that information is what ties us to the past rather than what separates us.

The first section of the book is composed of thirteen essays themed around various information related topics. The essays range between 15 and 26 pages long and are in roughly chronological order, though many essays cover decades, centuries, or even thousands of years. For instance, in Chapter 4, “Information in Early Modern Europe,” Blair pulls together threads from 800 CE to 1700 CE to set the stage for later more focused chapters such as Chapter 11. Richard R. John, in Chapter 11, “Publicity, Propaganda, and Public Opinion: From the Titanic Disaster to the Hungarian Uprising,” traces the role of news and propaganda in society over 34 years and two world wars.

The second portion of the book consists of 101 short entries on a variety of information keywords and topics, all organized in alphabetical order. It covers everything from accounting to xylography and includes a few surprise entries such as khipus, the knotting language and accounting system of the Inka. The short entries are between two and four pages in length. The short entries help fill in details that are glossed over in the essays and encourage thematic exploration.

The editors have laid out the book so that readers may explore in a variety of ways. The table of contents contains a list of the full chapter titles of the longer essays in roughly chronological order and a list of the shorter entries arranged alphabetically. The entries are also sorted thematically into concepts, formats, genres, objects, people, practices, processes, systems, and technologies. Cross-references, a glossary, and indexing all serve to further aid non-linear exploration of the book.

Exploration leaps beyond the book’s covers with an accompanying website which contains additional bibliographies for each entry. The site allows the authors to continue building and adding to the further reading lists for each area. These bibliographies could serve students and researchers in keeping up to date on the relevant literature for their topic. The current additional resource lists on the website are limited but have the potential to be an excellent resource if maintained.

In an unusual move, *Information* does not settle on any one definition of information, but instead lets each writer shape their definition within the work. This

was a successful choice on the part of the editors. Combined with the ability to explore themes across large swaths of time and geography, the lack of a single definition allows the authors to bring their varied expertise into their writing. The primary temporal focus on the early modern and modern periods and the thematic emphases on technology, the impacts of colonialism, globalization, and the “rise of the ‘information state’” all serve as strong threads throughout the essays.

The editors’ strengths in crafting a complex definition and discussion of information make the book’s weaknesses even more glaring. The first essay of the book, written by Anthony Grafton, begins in 1492, with Columbus sailing the ocean blue. This foreshadows the highly colonial perspective that runs throughout the book. The book has a strong focus on European and North American information. The global south, especially African nations, rarely appear. The Middle East, India, and China appear with only slightly more frequency. Fewer still are mentions of places and people beyond Europe and North America which are not framed by a colonial perspective. *Information* was written by 107 contributors from sixteen countries. Many of the authors are prominent in their fields and come from prestigious institutions: Harvard, Yale, Sydney, Bologna, Oxford, and many other leading institutions. The scale of contributors provides a large variety of viewpoints. However, this only serves to highlight the missing perspectives.

Interestingly, several of the essays acknowledge the gaps and missing perspectives. For instance, in Chapter 6 “Records, Secretaries, and the European Information State, circa 1400-1700,” Randolph C. Head notes,

A focus on written records, in turn, privileges literate societies – such as late medieval and early modern Europe – and literate individuals within them, while also drawing our attention to the institutions that enabled the creation and preservation of written records (2021, p.104).

Likewise, in Chapter 12, “Communication, Computation, and Information,” Duguid notes that writing revolves around white men and tends to hide the important roles of people of color and white women. Yet despite these and other self-aware moments, the missing perspectives were not actually addressed in any meaningful way. This is even more disappointing given how eloquently *Information* is written.

The compelling writing of the essays and entries leave the reader with a greater understanding of how our modern “Information Age” has grown on foundations centuries in the making. The editors have done an excellent job of weaving together work from a variety of disciplines into a cohesive whole. This book would be a useful addition to a university reference collection, especially one serving programs in library and information sciences, communication, technology, or history. The book is recommended with the caveat that the library should set aside additional funds to purchase texts that fill in the gaps of African, Central and South American, Asian, and Indigenous perspectives.