History in the iSchools

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Abstract
Although scholars have continually thought to focus on what information may be, questions about how and why information comes to us have been neglected and remain poorly understood. Our session seeks to address this lacuna by exploring historical conceptions of information and by developing the idea of “systems of information provision.” The conversation will engage in such questions as: What is to be gained by considering history in explorations of big data, data analytics, and informational systems? On the other hand, what hazards lie in a study of information that does not account for the forces of history? How does the current “data-driven” moment shed light on the past? How might iSchools enrich their programs by offering historical perspectives on the study of data, documents, information, libraries, archives, networks, and technologies? And are there dangers in information histories taking an instrumental cue from present-day information requirements and issues?

Keywords: history, information provision, knowledge production


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1 Description

Although scholars have continually thought to focus on what information may be, questions about how and why information comes to us – the historical circumstances of its provision – have been neglected and remain poorly understood. Our session seeks to address this lacuna by exploring historical conceptions of information and by developing the idea of “systems of information provision.” The conversation will engage in such questions as: What is to be gained by considering history in explorations of big data, data analytics, and informational systems? On the other hand, what hazards lie in a study of information that does not account for the shaping forces of history? How does the current “data-driven” moment shed light on the past? How might iSchools enrich their programs by offering historical perspectives on the study of data, documents, information, libraries, archives, networks, and technologies? And are there dangers in information histories taking an instrumental cue from present-day information requirements and issues?

2 Format

The Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois has a long-standing tradition in fostering historical explorations of books, libraries, and librarianship, and has been part of the iSchools organization since 2003. Today, almost a third of its faculty self-identify as historians of information. For this reason, a core of participants from Illinois will act as hosts of an informal “party,” and enlist invited guests in a public conversation about the history of information. The notion of party sets the appropriate mood for this spirited and shared engagement of the social, cultural, political, and economic issues around the provision of information. There will be room for open-ended debates and good-natured disagreements, as well as re-negotiations and the promise of future collaboration.
3 Participants

**Bonnie Mak** is a historian of books at the University of Illinois, where she is assistant professor. She combines her background in medieval studies with explorations of the production and circulation of knowledge in the 21st century. Her book, *How the Page Matters* (2011), examines the interface of the page from the fifteenth century to the present day, and the forthcoming article, “Archaeology of a Digitization,” scrutinizes the historical circumstances surrounding the construction of a database.

**Alistair Black** is a historian of libraries and librarianship at the University of Illinois, where he is full professor. He is author of *A New History of the English Public Library* (1996) and *The Public Library in Britain 1914–2000* (2000), and co-author of *The Early Information Society in Britain, 1900–1960* (2007); and *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering* (2009), a socio-architectural history of early public libraries in Britain. He is currently exploring the history of corporate libraries and staff magazines, and the design of public libraries in the 1960s.

**Dan Schiller** is a historian of telecommunications. He writes extensively on the development of digital capitalism and the social history of U.S. telecommunications. His forthcoming book is entitled *Digital Depression*. He was recently co-PI of a grant that supported a doctoral specialization in “Information in Society” at the Graduate School of Library & information Science at the University of Illinois, where he is appointed full professor.

To represent a diverse range of interests and perspectives, the following guests have been invited:

- **William Aspray** is the Bill and Lewis Suit Professor of Information Technologies at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a historian of science and technology, and editor of *Information & Culture: A Journal of History*.

- **Brian Beaton** is a historian of recent science and technology at the iSchool at the University of Pittsburgh, where he is beginning his second year as an assistant professor.

- **Greg Downey** is a historian of information labor and Director of the Center for the History of Print & Digital Culture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of the newest institutions to join the iSchools organization.

- **Heather MacNeil** is an archival scholar. She is appointed full professor at the iSchool, University of Toronto.

- **Laura Skouvig** is associate professor at the Royal School of Library and Information Science, University of Copenhagen. She is a cultural historian of information in early-19th-century Denmark.

4 Purpose, Intended Audience, Relevance to the Field

The purpose of the conversation is to locate the history of information within the iSchool movement; explore how information history is represented and taught across different iSchools; and showcase the relevance of historical research to the investigations of society, culture, information, and technology that constitute the shared focus of the iSchools.

Others are more than welcome to join the party. Audience members may be historians themselves, or perhaps scholars and students who are interested in learning more about humanistic approaches in the examination of information and technology. The discussion will therefore help to raise awareness of the diverse ways in which history is, and could be, taken up by iSchools in the study of information.
5 Proposed Activities

The hosts will offer short perspectives on the history of information, focusing on an aspect of research or teaching in the iSchool environment. These brief presentations will be followed by a lively conversation with invited guests about their own pursuit of information history, in different contexts, institutions, and countries. Audience members may then join in, ask questions, and share their relevant experiences.

6 References


