KNOWING INFORMATION:
THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF
INFORMATION IN AMERICAN
BUSINESS

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Social History of Ideas

- Historians have a rich appreciation of ideas like
  - Democracy
  - Progress
  - Whiteness
  - Liberty
  - Manliness
- These ideas are
  - Powerful
    - Have significance and power to historical actors
  - Slippery
    - Multiple definitions
    - Change over time
  - Enlisted and reshaped by many different groups
- Unwilling to use as neutral analytical categories

Information and Historians

- My argument: Information is a similar idea
- We need a social history of information
  - Mostly there isn't one.
  - Nunberg, Klein, Bowker have done relevant work
- We should be careful about how we use the concept to frame our own questions
  - Information concepts naturalize a certain view of the world…
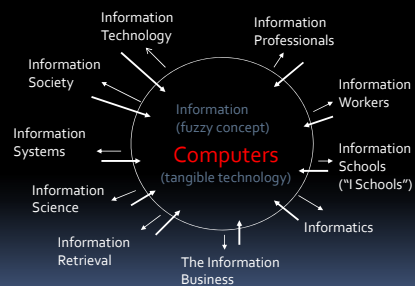 - Will return to at the end.

Information Today

- In Business
  - Almost all businesses have a "Chief Information Officer"
    - Some have dozens.
  - The computing department is usually called "Information Systems Division"
  - Computers are usually called "Information Technology"
  - Corporate IT staff are called "Information System Specialists" and similar titles
- In the university
  - "Informatics Schools" address IT applications
  - "Management Information Systems" means IT courses in business schools
  - Library Schools are called "Schools of Information Studies" etc.

Information as a Site of Expertise

- Trust me I'm a….
- Professions/technical occupations requires a demarcated object of expertise
  - Which is social constructed
  - Creation of a subjective world in which nature and validity of expertise is self-evident
- How/why/when does information become such a site within business & management?

The Information Cluster

Information Was About Informing

- OED shows word "Information" used back to 1450
  - Root is in act of "Informing"
    - "For your information" on a memo
    - Tourist information office
    - US Constitution: President "give Congress information of the state of the Union"
- (Analyzed by Geoff Nunberg – "Farewell to the Information Age")

AND THEN HE GOT A HIGH-SPEED FILE

Advertisement from System Magazine, mid-1910s

The Power of File Cards

"... Acme visible records force their owners to use the facts - profit by them, save money by them, stop losses before they get started.... Its successful operation in your business will be automatic..."
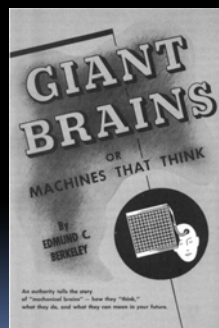
(Advertisement for Acme file cards, System magazine 1932)

Computer as "Fact-troller"

Giant Brains, 1949

- Computer as the latest and most powerful "physical equipment for handling information"
- Like nerve cells, writing, human gestures
- Earliest statement of this concept?

Management Information Systems

- Coined in 1959 by American Management Association group
  - "The Continuing Seminar on Management Information Systems"
  - Elites of the "systems", management consulting and computer vending communities
- Cliché of 1960s
- "Totally Integrated Management Information System"
  - INFORMS each manager of what he/she needs to know to make decisions
  - System include models, forecasts, projections
  - Used directly by top executives

MIS Will Realize Potential of computer...

ADP – THE STILL-SLEEPING GIANT

Harvard Business Review - 1964

Your business.

Univac Advertisement, Business Week 1965

Information Technology

- 1958 – Harvard Business Review – "Management in the 1980s".
  - First use of phrase "Information Technology"?
- IT =
  - Computers +
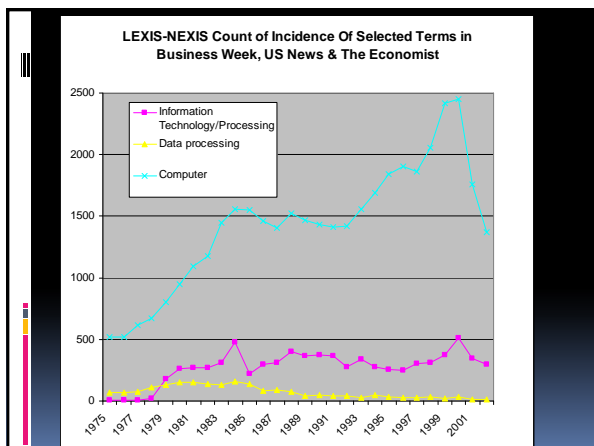 - Mathematical simulation +
  - Operations Research

Harvard Business Review
November-December 1958

New information flows cut new organization channels.

MANAGEMENT
in the 1980's

By Harold J. Leavitt and Thomas L. Whisler

Revived in 1970s

- IT receives few mentions during 1960s
- Revives in late 1970s
  - Along side Information Society, Computer Revolution, etc.
- Originally means
  - Computers + Telecoms
- Soon becomes a pretentious synonym for computers
  - Particularly in policy circles
  - (Today people talk about ICTs)

LEXIS-NEXIS Count of Incidence Of Selected Terms in Business Week, US News & The Economist

- Information Technology/Processing
- Data processing
- Computer

The CIO Concept

- CIO is the CFO of information
  - Information, not data processing or computers as site of expertise
  - Accounting – just one kind of information
- Information is the new money
  - The key resource of 1980s business
  - But nobody is in charge of it
- Claim to corporate power
  - "Data processing connotes a technical limitation... it is important the right identification be established"
  - Information gives powerful corporate mandate
    - "issuance of corporate policy and instructions is, in fact, an information service."

Identity Inflation

- 1950s: "Data Processing" is narrowly technical
  - Management Information Systems seems more managerial
- 1970s: MIS seems too narrowly technical
  - Chief Information Officer seems more managerial
- 2000s: CIO seems too narrowly technical
  - Chief Knowledge Officer seems more managerial
- Difficulty of blending technical & managerial roles, cultures, mandates
- Parallel:
  - Negro → Colored → Black → African American

We Have Seen

- The recent (post-1950) origins of
  - Information as a synonym for facts or data
  - IT, information systems & other info terms
  - Information as a commodity or fix for
- These developments were
  - Pushed by social groups seeking a broad and attractive domains for claimed expertise & products
  - Intimately bound up with the spread of computers into business

Implications for Historians

- Spate of books and exhibitions in 1990s on origins of the information revolution in
  - Telegraph
  - Printing press
  - Encyclopedias
- Good: Challenge "rupture talk" of Internet boom
- Bad: Project current understandings of information into past

Why Is This Bad?

- Erases work of historical actors
  - Information system concepts discovered, not invented
  - And anyway, had been there all along
- Remove possibility of understanding what historical actors through they were doing
  - E.g. recasts the history of accounting in terms of information
- Accepts concept of information as a thing to be stockpiled, manipulated, transmitted, etc
  - Endorses information as a domain of expert knowledge