Panel Proposal for ASIS&T 2009 Annual Meeting

Title: New Directions in Information History

Organizer: Thomas Haigh, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Chair: Robert Williams, BOBWILL@mailbox.sc.edu, University of South Carolina

Sponsorship: ASIS&T SIGHFIS and SIGSI

Participants:

- Thomas Haigh, thaigh@computer.org, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, "Challenges and Opportunities in Information History."

- Greg Downey, gdowney@wisc.edu, University of Wisconsin, Madison, *"Information history meets communication history."*

- Geoffrey Bowker, gbowker@scu.edu, Santa Clara University, "*'Did that really happen?' The search for the useful fact from the Enlightenment to the present*"

- William Aspray, bill@ischool.utexas.edu, University of Texas, Austin, *"The Use of History in Studying Information-Seeking Behavior in Everyday American Life "*

Panel Summary

Recent decades have seen an upsurge in scholarly activity in the history of information science. It has emerged as a field of study distinct from library history and from the history of computing, thanks to the work of scholars such as Boyd Rayward, Michael Buckland, and Trudi Bellardo-Hahn, and to a series of conferences (Bowden, Hahn & Williams 1999; Rayward & Bowden 2004) and books devoted to the topic (Hahn & Buckland 1998; Bourne & Hahn 2003). But so far most historical work has been conducted within the professional and intellectual paradigms of information science. It has been, to use a term from the history of science, internalist: concerned primarily with the accomplishments of distinguished individuals and with the content and context of important discoveries and inventions. Its insights have been directed internally, for the benefit of the information science community.

This panel explores the relevance of other historical approaches and the potential for information history (Weller 2008) to reach other audiences. The four panelists have all combined graduate training in the historical or social study of science and technology with faculty positions within information schools.

Thomas Haigh sets the context for the session with a brief review of the development of information history to date and a comparison of its trajectory with that of longer established fields of technical and scientific history including the history of science and the history of computing. After introducing the concepts of internalist and externalist approaches to the study of history, he argues that the field should open itself to greater engagement with questions and methods developed in other historical fields. He considers three examples of the kinds of challenges and opportunities this opens up: exploring social and political influences on the development of innovation, considering users of technological systems as well as producers, and integrating established historical concerns such as the influence of the Cold War on American science. He concludes that the inherent importance of information to the recent past offers us a great opportunity to produce historical work of broad interest.

Downey continues with a look at prospects for synergy with another historical field, in his discussion of ""Information history meets communication history." He examines past, present, and future connections between the history of communication and the history of information, in terms of both research literature and classroom practices. Today an environment of digital and institutional convergence between publishing, journalism, advertising, entertainment, computing and memory practices offers a productive opportunity for collaboration between information studies (McKercher & Mosco 2007) and communication studies scholars (Deuze 2007) -- but the histories of these intertwined industries are rarely considered together. A broad reconceptualization of "information/communication labor" (Downey 2004) may offer a new analytical point of connection for historians from both fields.

Bowker pushes back the scope of information history beyond its conventional focus on the events of the past century or so, extending his recent work on memory practices (Bowker 2006). Today, he observes, it is hard to escape Google today when arguing over an arcane piece of information - it's just too easy to find the price of beef in Poland or the names of the moons of Saturn. But this is a new development; we have over the past several centuries (McArthur 1986) been compiling vast databases of facts about ourselves and the world we live in. His talk examines the growth of this technology over this period, and explores the social and organizational dimensions of this work. His central thesis is that information seeking has most often been a collaborative activity occurring in specific social and cultural settings.

Aspray concludes the presentations with a look at the use social, cultural, business, and technology history in the study of information-seeking behavior and of information in everyday life. Activities in everyday American life such as genealogy, philanthropy, airline travel, bra fitting, sports, domestic violence, and political expression - topics that are being explored by his students and colleagues - will be mentioned as illustration, and a more extended example will be drawn from Aspray's own research on a century of car buying in America (Aspray, forthcoming). His work is built in part on scholarship of the Internet and everyday life (Wellman & Haythonthwaite 2002; Bakardjieva 2005), sharing its concern with home context (Lally 2002) as well as online behavior, its focus on users, and its belief that users are not passive accepters of technology but instead shape it to their own uses and meaning. This scholarship differs from most Internet and everyday life studies in focusing on historical methods rather than relying primary on ethnographic or survey methods, or on cultural and critical theory. This difference in focus enables the scholar to better understand changes over time in information questions and information sources as well as the drivers responsible for this change.

Presentations will be kept short to leave plenty of time for interaction between the panelists and with other attendees.

About the Speakers

Thomas Haigh (Ph.D. University of Pennsylvania, 2003) is Assistant Professor in the School of Information Studies of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He has published many articles on the history of information technology and its use in business, addressing topics such as the history of word processing, web browsers, search engines, database management systems, software packages and the US computer industry. Currently he is working on two books and preparing an article on the History of Information Technology for ARIS&T. He has chaired both the ASIS&T SIG on the History & Foundations of Information Science (2007-8) and the SIG on Computers, Information & Society of the Society, www.sigcis.org, of the History of Technology (2005-present). His website is www.tomandmaria.com/tom.

Geoffrey C. Bowker is Executive Director, Regis and Dianne McKenna Professor, Center for Science, Technology and Society, Santa Clara UniversityHe was previously Professor in and Chair of the Department of Communication, University of California, San Diego. He has written with Leigh Star a book on the history and sociology of medical classifications (Sorting Things Out: Classification and Practice - published by MIT Press in September 1999). This book looks at the classification of nursing work, diseases, viruses and race. His recent book, entitled Memory Practices in the Sciences about formal and informal recordkeeping in science over the past two hundred years, which includes extensive discussion of biodiversity informatics, was published by MIT Press in February 2006 and won the ASIST prize for best book in Information Science as well as the Fleck Prize for best book in Social Studies of Science.   More information, including a number of publications can be found at his website: http://epl.scu.edu/~gbowker.

Greg Downey (Ph.D. Johns Hopkins University, 2000) is a tenured associate professor in both the School of Journalism & Mass Communication and the School of Library & Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His split departmental position encourages him to connect information history and communication history in both his teaching and his research. Downey has recently completed a 100-page joint AHA/SHOT booklet on "Technology and communication in American history," in which he attempts to make the connections between these two fields apparent for undergraduate readers. He is also the author of two monographs which each cross the boundary between information history and communication history using the analytical concept of information/communication labor: Telegraph messenger boys: Labor, technology, and geography, 1850-1950 (Routledge, 2002) and Closed captioning: Subtitling, stenography, and the digital convergence of text with television (Johns Hopkins, 2008).

William Aspray is the Bill and Lewis Suit Professor of Information Technologies in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. His current scholarship is not only on information in everyday American life, but also on the informatics of diabetes, the history of privacy, and social and economic analysis of the Internet and new media. He has formerly taught at Harvard, Indiana, Minnesota, Virginia Tech, and Williams and has held senior management positions at Computing Research Association, IEEE-Rutgers Center for the History of Electrical Engineering, and the Charles Babbage Institute.

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