

New Directions in Information History



Challenges and Opportunities in Information History

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History of Information Science

- Emerged during 1990s
 - SIG FIS → SIG HFIS (1994)
 - Two major conferences “History & Heritage...”
 - Hahn & Buckland, *Historical Studies in Information Science* (1998)
- Discovery/construction of history of information science before 1945
 - Rayward’s work in particular
 - Buckland’s recent biography of Goldstein

FIRST THE CHALLENGES

Challenges

- Initial flurry of LIS History activity seems to be complete
- Emeritus status of the most active figures in History of Information Science
 - Buckland, Rayward, Williams, etc.
- Dwindling commitment to history within professional schools (not just LIS)
 - Relatively prominent place within “librarianship”
 - Not seen as central to “iSchools” or “informatics”
 - History is not a discipline people have in mind when calling for interdisciplinarity

More Challenges

- Are Ph.D. students in LIS able and encouraged to follow historical topics?
- Format & Culture of ASIS&T Conference
 - Also the price!
 - New format will be worse?!?
- “History” and “Foundations” may diverge
- History is a secondary interest for many people
- Has history slipped out of social informatics?
 - Has social informatics failed as a movement anyway?

Balkanization of Identities

- History of Information Science
 - ASIS&T SIGHFIS
- Library History (institutional focus)
 - Library History Roundtable
 - Library History -> Library & Information History
 - Libraries & Culture -> Libraries & the Cultural Record
 - Professional historians absent in field (Black, 2006)
- History of Computing/History of IT
 - SHOT SIGCIS (www.sigcis.org)
 - IEEE Annals of the History of Computing

HMM. WHAT ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES

Information History – A New Identity?

- Alastair Black – apparent coiner
 - Nice 2006 ARIST article
 - Recent book by Toni Weller
- Includes
 - History of libraries books, reading, publishing
 - History of “Information Disciplines”
 - History of Information Society
 - History of MIS, etc. etc. etc.
- More a perspective than a topic
 - Daunting scope, but can “place an information spin on particular past events or topics” (Black, 2006)
- Follows inevitably from shift to iSchools?

Lessons From Other Fields

- A similar pattern has been followed in
 - History of Science, History of Technology, History of Computing
- This is
 - Pioneers have avocational historical interest
 - Early work targeted within community
 - Gradual shift to younger scholars with Ph.D. training within a historical discipline
 - Gradual shift in questions, methods, audience, journals
- Will information history remain an exception?
 - Alasdair Black called it “History without historians” in ARIST.

Internalism vs. Externalism

- Important categories in history of science into 1980s
 - Externalism began in the 1930s as a Marxist critique of the idea of science as operating outside societal influence
 - Now rather quaint
- I have a chart....

To Simplify Somewhat

Internalist	Externalist
Intellectual history	Social and cultural history
Framed with concepts from technical discipline	Framed with concepts from historical fields
Narrative of logical progress	Narrative of historical contingency
Author from inside discipline	Author from outside discipline
Deep understanding of technical material	Variable understanding of technical material
Intended to be read within the discipline	Intended to be read by historical specialists
(Old School) History and Philosophy of Science	Science Studies or History & Sociology of Science
Celebrates heritage & pioneers	Questions and problematizes received assumptions

Our Panel Members

- People with Ph.D.s in history of science or allied fields employed in LIS/iSchools.
 - In some sense outsiders to existing LIS history
 - Mostly not active within SIGHFIS
 - Representing externalist positions?
- Here
 - Thomas Haigh: UW Milwaukee
 - William Aspray: UT Austin
 - Geoff Bowker: Pitt
- Invited but could not make it
 - Paul Edwards: Michigan
 - Greg Downey: UW Madison

Ex 1: Social & Political Influences on Innovation

- “Mutual shaping” of science/technology and society
 - Key question in science studies
- Are cultural values built into technological artifacts and systems?
 - Do these favor some social groups over others?
- Concepts/vocabulary such as
 - Technological closure
 - Social construction of technological systems

Ex 2: History of Users and Use

- Trend toward looking at USERS not just INVENTORS and PRODUCERS of technology
 - Since 1980s in history of technology and science studies
 - Parallel to studies of information use?
- Key insights
 - Use is how technology has an influence
 - Users make their own meanings
 - Rarely those anticipated by inventors
 - Users select which innovations are successful
- Issue for history of information science
 - Scope of practices vs. recognition

Ex 3: The Cold War and US Science

- Unique political environment of the late-1940s and 1950s gave rise to
 - Rhetoric of “pure” and “applied” research and the pipeline from science to technology
 - Expectation of constantly expanding government funding for pure science
 - Rapid development of computer technology
- Similar driving force behind establishment of “information science”
 - Some work by Colin Burke on intelligence aspects of Cold War
 - Less on Cold War as structural framework behind the entire scientific and economic infrastructure

SUMMARY & QUESTIONS

History is Integrative and Interdisciplinary

- History explains why things are as they are
 - We are defined by stories
- Historical claims and narratives are used all the time
 - Usually they’re gratuitously ill-informed
 - This leads to some dumb decisions
- Disciplines tend to balkanize (within & without)
 - History can integrate perspectives

Will Historians Care?

- About the internal development of LIS as a field
 - Maybe, particularly as a comparative case vs. CS, MIS, Cybernetics, etc.
- About the emergence of information as a vital category in late 20th century discourse?
 - Yes! Not yet, but they will do one day!
- About changes in information practices
 - Yes! That's what makes the technology matter.

Questions for Discussion

- Institutional
 1. Tactics for historians of science/technology to integrate and thrive in LIS/information schools
 2. Can history survive in iSchools?
 3. Can history survive in ASIS&T?
- Disciplinary/intellectual
 4. LIS History or Information History?
 5. Should library history and LIS history continue as "history without historians?"
 6. What is the "history of information science and technology?"
 - Primarily LIS history (recent Williams article)?
 - Primarily history of computing?