Book review


Few cliches are repeated more often or with greater enthusiasm these days than the one that insists that we are living through an unprecedented information revolution. On its face, the assertion is hard to challenge. Barely fifty years after the introduction of the electronic computer, everything about the way in which we gather, store, and use information seems not only different from what it used to be, but also in a constant state of flux. The vast amount of available information, the ease with which we can get at it, the global reach of networking, the speed of making connections, the progressive miniaturization of information devices, even the steadily falling price of this equipment—all these, we think, must surely denote a transition unparalleled in any previous age. If it all seems daunting to those who struggle to keep up with relentless technological change, the process also offers a kind of subliminal salve for the contemporary ego: we are experiencing something no other society ever has before, and our ability to cope and adapt must indicate our superiority, a reassurance that we are more "advanced."

Like most cliches, this one holds up only until we begin actually to think about it, and then we realize that it distorts as much as it explains. Today’s "unprecedented" information revolution has, in fact, many precedents, and some of these earlier shifts were surely more revolutionary than that of the present. Historians have begun to explore a number of these, and the scholarly literature on the subject has grown encouragingly in the last two decades. Classicists such as William Harris, Rosalind Thomas, and James Sickinger, for example, have analyzed what may be the most successful information revolution of them all: the invention and spread of literacy in the ancient world. What change could have been more powerful in its effects than the suddenly-new ability to store information outside the brain and still be able to
remember and retrieve it reliably, using the new technology that was writing? Medievalists too, led by M.T. Clanchy and Rosamund McKitterick, have found this a particularly fertile field of study. These historians have explored not only the shifting balance between orality and literacy but also the ways in which societies, still made up for the most part of people who could not read or write themselves, came to rely on writing and to trust it. Every time one goes to the bookstore, it seems, there is a new volume on the history of reading in some other time or place. While students sometimes question their teachers’ assertions that history can be relevant to contemporary concerns, the case for relevance is easy to make here. We can indeed learn something about our own information revolution if we study those of the past.

Two fine contributions to that understanding are presented in Peter Burke’s *Social History of Knowledge* and Daniel Headrick’s *When Information Came of Age*. Together, they encompass a long span of early modern and modern European history. After reaching back to the high middle ages for context, Burke concentrates on the period between Gutenberg in the middle fifteenth century and Diderot in the middle of the eighteenth; Headrick picks up the story there and extends it into the middle of the nineteenth century. The changes in information technology in those four centuries, and more importantly in the roles information played in society, came thick and fast: the perfection of movable type printing and the proliferation of books; increasingly complex attempts to organize knowledge, symbolized by Diderot’s ambitious Encyclopedia; the emergence of scholarly communities with their own distinct and specialized knowledges, dependent on such tasks as editing, criticizing, translating, and publishing; the always shifting relationship between the new information communities and powerful institutions of state and church. As the sheer amount of information expanded, new ways had to evolve for maintaining some sort of control over it – not control in the sense of restricting access to it (though that sometimes happened), but in the sense of understanding it, of being able to account for both specific detail and larger generalization, and indeed of simply being able to retrieve particular information when needed. Burke provides a broad framework for understanding the social context in which knowledge and information operated, while Headrick considers a variety of information systems that made it possible both to consolidate and to advance that knowledge.

Burke, professor of cultural history at Cambridge and fellow of Emmanuel College, first presented his discussion of the earlier period in the Vonhoff Lectures at the University of Groningen, and his book’s genesis as lectures is evident on every page in its fluid, approachable style. No mere overview, however, it is grounded in prodigious scholarship, Burke’s own and that of others: the forty-page bibliography (modestly labeled “select” and including