

*Information: A Historical Companion*. Edited by Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. xx + 881 pp. \$65. Hardcover ISBN 9780691179544.

This fist-thick volume is an unusual collection positioned at the intersection of History and Information Studies. The goals of the text are addressed in the brief yet effective Introduction (vii-xii): the collection brings together researchers who have “directly engaged with information in historical context” and “offers readers views of history through a lens of information and views of information through the lens of history” (vii). In a range of chapters and shorter lemmas, the authors relate the idea of the “information age,” a concept commonly connected to the modern period, to earlier moments in time, history, and space. The geo-cultural scope of the volume is broad and includes Asia, the Islamic World, and Europe; the temporal emphasis is defined as ca. 1450-present. The broad temporal scope supports the volume’s purpose of “drawing the [past and present] together rather than separating them” (vii). The book is organized into two parts, which are distinctly different in length, contents, and reporting mode, yet united in that they touch on the same themes, including globalization, networks, media types, and the importance of print.

Part 1 (pages 3-284) comprises thirteen chapters of around twenty pages each, which are presented without further organisation and presented in more or less chronological order. Grafton’s opening contribution sets the tone for the inclusive temporal and geographical perspective of this first part, and indeed the entire book. Spanning four millennia and framed by the trade routes originating in China and India, Grafton discusses the “information regime” of the Roman Empire, the impact of paper on trade, and Columbus as an eye witness *rappporteur* of his time. The concluding chapter, by Daniel Rosenberg, discusses the notion and activity of “searching” in different historical eras. As in Grafton’s piece and many others that follow, Rosenberg touches upon a broad range of topics, from Google’s search parameters, to Hugh of St-Cher’s medieval concordance, to the 1737 verbal index on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, to the third century BCE tables of categories on Callimachus that were lost in the library of Alexandria. In between these two bookended contributions, the volume presents eleven more excellent chapters on such topics as information practices in Early Modern Asia and Early Modern Europe, networks and globalization, the commercialization of information, and publicity. The thirteen essays present a rollercoaster of case studies, perspectives, and syntheses. Yet, the chapters’ volume and scope never confuse: while rich in detail, the essays in Part 1 are carefully calibrated and rendered coherent by the provocative methodological framework presented in the Introduction.

Part 2 (pages 287-831) consists of one hundred and one short lemmas, mostly two-five pages in length, which are presented in alphabetical order. These shorter pieces focus more on individual topics than the essays and touch on relevant activities (digitization, indexing, programming), concepts (censorship, error, intellectual property), roles (proofreaders, scribes, secretaries), and media (books, journals, social media). Each lemma is helpfully supported by a Further Reading section. These short pieces also present, though to varying degrees, the blend of History and Information Studies set out in the Introduction; this mix is even present in topics where

combining these elements may seem challenging. For example, in his chapter on photocopiers, Michael K. Buckland discusses the history and impact of photocopying techniques (photostatic prints, microfilm, electrostatic copying, and duplicators). He then takes a step away from a historical narrative and discusses how “copying is not simply making a copy but a rendering or a version of the original, and any such process might introduce errors or distortions” (657). The move towards Information Studies continues as he subsequently shows how such distortion can be used to our advantage as scholars because, for example, it makes erased text visible. The pieces in this second part are equally inclusive of varied historical periods and cultures, though some more than others. Each contribution in this part recommends a handful of lemmas as further reading, inviting the reader to read on, dive deeper, and broaden the perspective. Delving into this collection of shorter entries is highly addictive.

As mentioned, a signature feature of this volume is that concepts are traced across different historical periods. Generally, this approach works well and adds to the strength of the book and to its aim to draw past and present together. However, at times authors have to “bend” or “mould” their observations and examples somewhat to create a good fit in their narratives. For example, the lemma on “proofreaders” (709-712) devotes substantial attention to the era of printing (fitting for both the concept and the volume’s peaked interest in the Early Modern period), but also includes examples from Antiquity (Cicero, Seneca, and the library of Emperor Domitian) and the Middle Ages (Abbot Desiderius in Monte Cassino, Parisian *stationarii*, and “proofhearing” in Arabic book culture). What the eleventh-century monk Desiderius was doing, however, is not proofreading. The author, Paolo Sachet, is the first to admit this (though he is incorrect in assuming that scribes did not systematically check finished copies) and introduces Desiderius as an individual who comes close to a proofreader in that he “went through a newly or recently written manuscript” (710). Apart from the fact that it remains unclear what Desiderius precisely did when he “went through” the manuscript, the lemma also fails to clarify how this case adds to our understanding of the future concept of proofreading. Tracing the roots of phenomena in earlier periods can be challenging and it sometimes requires more contextualization and nuance than space allows in these short lemmas.

Even so, these “panoramic” views are generally fascinating, even if it means that the reader needs to leniently bend with the subject matter, within the confines of the writing format and the broader intentions of the collected texts. The success of this volume is not limited to the fascinating subject matter and its attractive angle on information as a field of inquiry, to the impressive breadth of discussion, or even the quality of the individual contributions. It is the mix of longer and shorter pieces and the strength in their combined use that makes this book so powerful: Part 1 provides detailed historic and thematic backdrops, while Part 2 supports deeper understanding by further highlighting certain themes and phenomena. In fact, its composition promotes a remarkable dynamic use of the information it holds: it is not just a volume with a fascinating breadth of information presented from a unique vantage point, but also a type of utilitarian tool that prompts readers to undertake highly individual investigative journeys themselves. In fact, the volume is geared towards such dynamic use through the included Glossary (833-840), a sizable Index (841-

881), an Alphabetical List of Entries (xiii-xiv), and a Thematic List of Entries (xv-xvi). The Further Reading sections invite readers to explore even beyond the book itself—though the absence of footnotes makes it challenging to easily find specific additional information, which is somewhat ironic in light of the book’s subject matter and mission. The added value makes this unique publication appealing to a broad audience, from general readers and students to specialists looking for new perspectives and inspiration.

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