Information in its Context

Today:

- Putting technology in its place: technological social, legal, and political settings. (GN)
- The historical creation of "information" as a social category (GN & PD)
What has not changed and what has

Information = a conceptual template for classifying the various technologies, practices, and political, social, & legal institutions that contribute to the creation, collection, storage, transmission, diffusion, and reproduction of knowledge in a particular society... hence an eternal & universal notion.
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Information = a conceptual template for classifying the various technologies, practices, and political, social, & legal institutions that contribute to the creation, collection, storage, transmission, diffusion, and reproduction of knowledge in a particular society...... hence an eternal & universal notion.

But “information” as a self-conscious concept has played a role in Western thinking only since the 18th century or so.

Cf “the market,” literacy, etc.
the dangers of "presentism"

Imposing modern notions (e.g., of information) on earlier periods -- depicting the past through the lens of the present.
the dangers of "presentism"

Imposing modern notions (e.g., of information) on earlier periods -- depicting the past through the lens of the present.

Was Sampson the first suicide terrorist?
Presentizing “information”

Seeing information through the lens of modern “IT”
Presentizing “information”

Seeing information through the lens of modern “IT”

Cf the tendency to “psychologize” IT -- talk of “multitasking,” etc.
Other eg’s?
Information and "Information Technologies"

History 3493 (U. of Oklahoma) The Cultural History of Information. Prerequisite: junior standing or permission of instructor.

An introduction to the history of information technologies and communications media from the printing press to the internet. Topics will include the print revolution, the advent of electronic communications, the growth of broadcast media, the development of the digital computer, and the internet boom.
An aside: prototype semantics

Defining *furniture*:
Defining "Information Technologies"

The modern category of information is associated with certain prototypical "information technologies":
More marginal instances of "information technologies"
What isn't IT?
A “Natural” Assumption:

History of Information = Tracing ancestry of prototypical instances of IT
Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies

One way to tell the "history of printing"
Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies

Times Printing Press -- 1814

Foudrinier Machine, 1811
Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies

Times Printing Press -- 1814

Foudrinier Machine, 1811

Stephenson's Rocket, 1827
Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies

- Times Printing Press -- 1814
- Foudrinier Machine, 1811
- Strap-iron rails
- Stephenson's Rocket, 1827
Complicating the Story, 1:
The Interconnection of Technologies

Times Printing Press -- 1814

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Strap-iron rails

Every technology sits in a technological custard...
Rethinking "Information Technologies"
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Complicating the Story, 2: The Social Setting of Technologies

The 19th c. newspaper required....

Specialization of Skills

Specialization of Commercial Roles
Complicating the Story, 2: The Social Setting of Technologies

The 19th c. newspaper required....

Growth of Literacy
Complicating the Story, 2: The Social Setting of Technologies

Other factors: Availability of capital
Emergence of professional journalism
Shifts in political partisanship, relaxation of censorship
Rise of science & "objectivity,"

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Moral: Technologies interact with social, legal, economic factors in complex and underdetermined ways...
The historical rise of 'information'

How did "information" become a central, self-conscious category in modern thought?
The emergence of “information” as a self-conscious category

What makes something count as “information” for us?
What makes something "information"?

Medium:
“information” usually presumes a fixed medium of storage or transmission.
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Measurability
An average copy of the daily New York Times contains more information than a 17th-century Englishman encountered in a lifetime.” (PD)
What makes something "information"?

Medium:
Measurability
Setting

"Information" belongs to public or institutional life

"A letter from your old acquaintance, the housekeeper at the Grange," I answered. She would gladly have gathered it up at this information, but Hareton beat her. (*Wuthering Heights*)
What makes something "information"?

- **Medium:**
  - Measurability
  - Setting
  - "objectivity"/transferability

Compare "medical information" with "medical knowledge"
The 20th-century scientization of "Information"

It's not something we can see, really. We certainly can't touch, taste, hear, or smell it. Yet it's always there when we look for it, available wherever we bother to direct our attention. We can glean it from the pages of a book or the morning newspaper and from the glowing phosphors of a video screen. Scientists find it stored in our genes and in the lush complexity of the rain forest. The Vatican Library has a bunch of it, and so does Madonna's latest CD. And it's always in the air where people come together, whether to work, play, or just gab. What is it that can be so pervasive and yet so mysterious? Information, of course...

The meanings of "information"

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The (Pre)history of "Information"