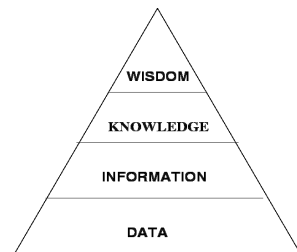


## The Informations

1218 Concepts of Information, Feb 17, 2015

Geoff Nunberg

Men register their thoughts wrong, by the inconstancy of the signification of their words; by which they register for their conceptions that which they never conceived, and so deceive themselves. —Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*



### **Back to Words Again...**

What could *information* mean, if anything?

When did *information* start to go squirrely?

A philological digressus

Why couldn't science straighten us out?

### **Does "information" mean anything at all?**

"Information is a high-frequency and low-content phrase that permeates our ordinary language without attracting much attention, since its meaning has long eroded."

Pieter Adriaans and Johan van Benthem

"...a sloppy, pseudoscientific catch-all...an "amoeba word... an oracular authority and inspirational text." Uwe Purksen, *Plastic Words*

### ***In ordinary usage, is information...***

Simply "loose" or "sloppy" or "bleached"?

Vague? (like *nice* or *democratic*)

General? (like *structure* or *artifact*)

Polysemous? (like *gossip* or *instruction*)

Ambiguous (like *mass*, *intelligence* or *paper*)

### ***Collocations listed in OED and possible synonyms in each sense***

Information revolution, society, age

digital, internet, post-industrial, service  
\_\_ science, theory  
  *signal, entropy, document, communication*  
\_\_ technology  
  *digital, computer, electronic*  
\_\_ explosion, glut, anxiety\*, overload, rich, poor  
  *knowledge, data, content, access*  
\_\_ architect, officer  
  *knowledge, technology*  
\_\_ storage, retrieval, processing  
  *data, knowledge*

### **Gimcrack concepts**

Most accounts of objectivity – philosophical, sociological, political – address it as a concept.... But if it is a pure concept, it is less like a bronze sculpture cast from a single mold than like some improvised contraption soldered together out of mismatched parts of bicycles, alarm clocks, and steam pipes.

Lorraine Gaston & Peter Gallison, *Objectivity* (2007)

We can have concepts without words... but gimcrack concepts can exist only when there are words for them

"Whenever we have made a word to denote a certain group of phenomena, we are prone to suppose a substantive entity existing beyond the phenomena, of which the word shall be the name."

—William James, *Principles of Psychology*

### **Stepping Back**

#### **II. The imparting of knowledge in general.**

**4. a.** The shaping of the mind or character; communication of instructive knowledge; education... Now *rare*. ("Bildung" sense)

1736 Our Reason and Affections, which God has given us, for the Information of our Judgment and the Conduct of our Lives.

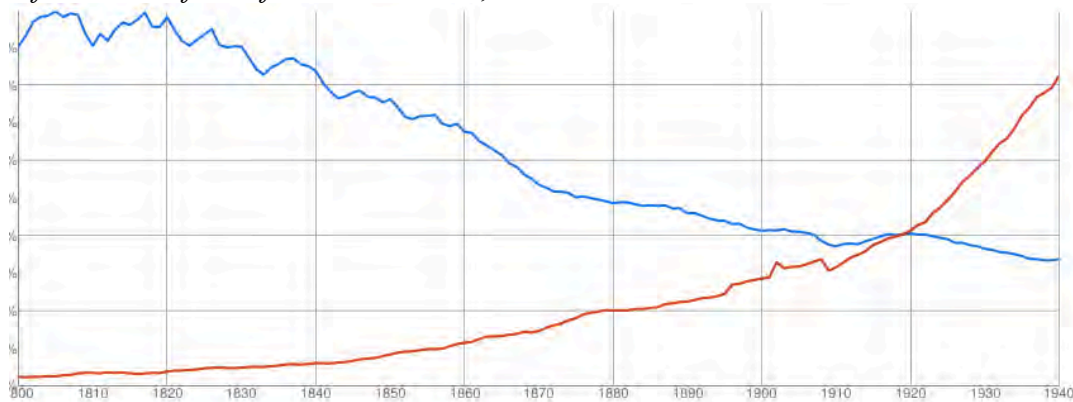
1813 T. Jefferson Writings (1830) IV. 182 The book I have read with extreme satisfaction and information.

CF "For your information"

5 a Knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event... intelligence, news. ("Propositional" sense, from inform "impart knowledge") Information in this period often more like "news":

But as I had not when I despatched the vessel received any information of the declaration of war. 1814

*Information of vs information about , 1800-1940*

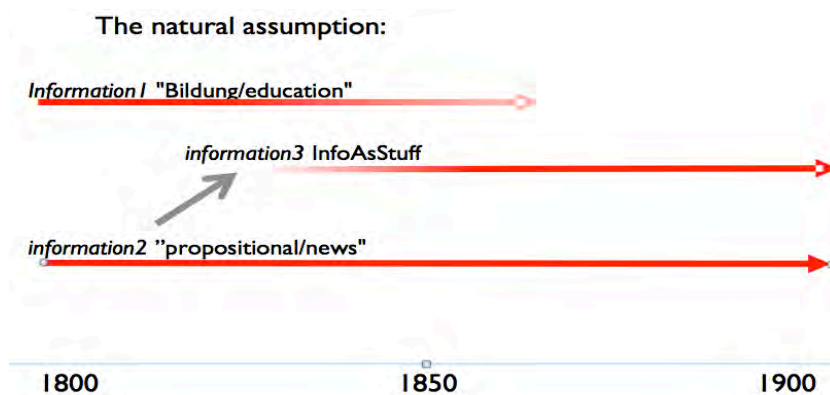


3. Records of a factual nature, either published, or assembled and maintained by public entities or institutions. [GN, not OED] (representations/"public" sense)

They give their monthly penny, and we try to give them sixteen -pages of information.... The Cottager's friend, and guide of the young, 1844

Business must lay hold of modern library methods if they were to keep up with the steadily growing and important mass of printed information. Bull. of the Am. Lib. Assoc. 1913

Where is the new "information" from?



But "propositional" information and "stuff" information are different

Cf other languages:

Senses translate differently in other lgs

INFORMATION-AS-STUFF:

The information age (society etc.)

L'age de l'information (not l'age des informations or ~ d'information)

L'età dell'informazione (sg.)

## PROPOSITIONAL INFORMATION

My information is reliable.

Le mie informatzioi sono attendibili. (pl.)

?La mia informazione è attendibile. (sg)

Highly sensitive information...

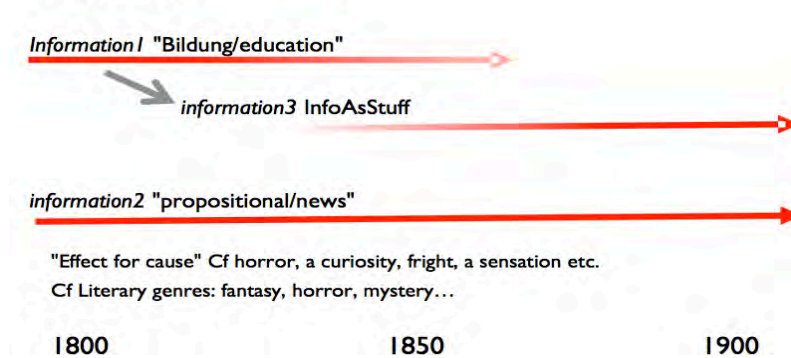
streng vertrauliche Informationen/?streng vertraulich Information

### ***Distinguishing the Two informations:***

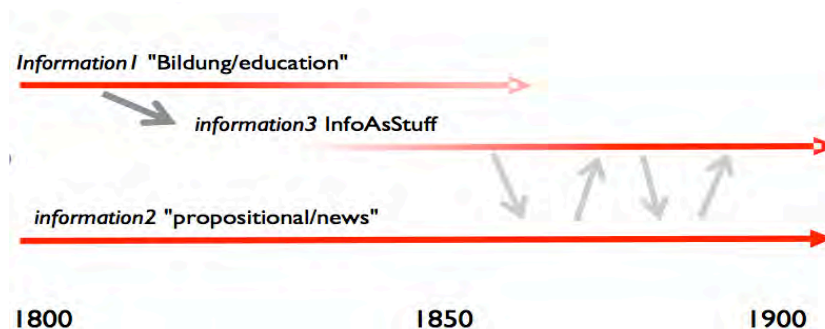
How much information is there in the world?

??How much true information is there in the world?

**The real story:**



But senses blur:



### ***A natural confusion***

Examples of information = "edification, education"

...though without any of the early delight in books which had been so strong in Fanny, with a disposition much less inclined to information for information's sake, ... —Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 1814

I would not be hurried by any love of system, to underrate the Book.... Great and heroic men have existed, who had almost no other information than by the printed page. —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," 1837

You will... receive much entertainment from Horace Walpole's letters, and also considerable information – shall I add edification? *The Living Age*, 1844

Cf *Emma*

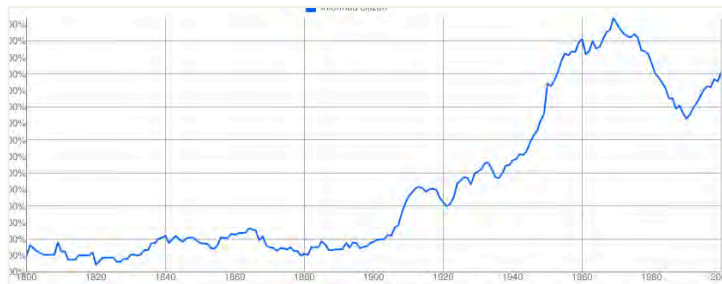
‘ ‘Was he agreeable?’—‘He was generally thought so.’ ‘Did he appear a sensible young man; a young man of information?’... it was difficult to decide on such points. ... She believed every body found his manners pleasing.” —Jane Austen, *Emma*, 1815

Movie: “Is he a man of information?” “All his statements seemed correct.”

Cf shift in “well informed”

To come with a well-informed mind is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 1798

Without a well-informed and tender conscience, confusion and vice will rule the mind. 1805



Relative freq. of “informed citizen,” 1800-2000

### ***The Two Informations***

*Propositional Information* communicated/communicable knowledge of particular states of affairs PI is usually veridical

*Information as stuff*: embodied, factualistic representations produced by the expansion of the media, corporations, and the modern state.

But senses interact:

#### FEATURES OF INFORMATION-AS-STUFF

IaS typically belongs to public, commercial, 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*, 1847

Connection of *information* to the state; cf “personal information”

??“We spent our first date exchanging personal information”

Sense colors meaning of propositional *information* as well

“Can you give me some information about the party tonight?”  
(prob. = department party, not friend’s birthday party)

Police are seeking information about the break-in.

?I asked my neighbor for some information about the break-in in her house

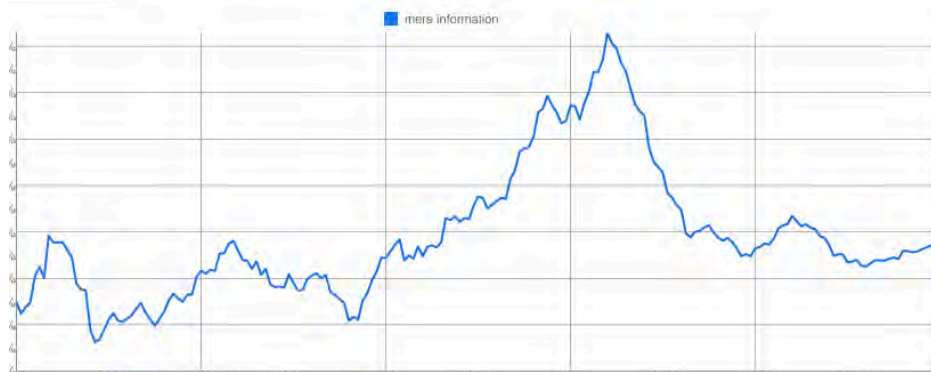
IaS generally presumes a fixed medium of storage or transmission: "present" in the world; can be transferred from one medium to another.

IaS is morselized/measurable/commodified

"N times as much information" etc.

n.b. at this stage of print culture, measures of IaS roughly correlate w/ propositional density. More pages = more facts

### **Twentieth-century developments**



mere information" in Google Books 1800-2000

When I was growing up in the years just before World War II, information was nothing to get excited about. As an intellectual category, it held a humble and marginal status... There was also, through the 1930s and 1940s, a popular radio program [called "information please"] which challenged listeners to stump a panel of experts by sending in unlikely questions about assorted trivia. Who was the shortest president of the United States? ... That was the way most people thought about information in those days: disjointed matters of fact that came in discrete little bundles. Theodore Roszak

Until World War II, [*information*] referred to the personal act of acquiring knowledge.... But during the war, "information" got redefined as something quantifiable that could be collected, moved, and processed."

*Business Week*

Information as Stuff → product of analysis and processing

*5 e. Contrasted with data: that which is obtained by the processing of data.*

### **MBA Epistemology**

Data are facts and statistics that can be quantified, measured, counted, and stored. Information is data that has been categorized, counted, and thus given meaning, relevance, or purpose. Knowledge is information that has been given meaning and taken to a higher level. Knowledge emerges from analysis, reflection upon, and synthesis of information.

Data are facts that are the result of observation or measurement. Information is meaningful data. ... Knowledge is internalized or understood information that can be used to make decisions. *Prof. Carol Tenopir, University of Tennessee*



### *A Spurious Source*

Where is the life we have lost in the living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

-- T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" 1934

### *An Old Trope*

Our people want an education for their children which rests on demonstrable facts but which so relates and interprets facts as to convert *information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom*. James Merrill (pres. Of U. Of MN.) *The Crisis of Mankind*, 1947

The ideals of its institutions: to elevate instruction into knowledge; to deepen knowledge into wisdom; to render knowledge and wisdom complete in righteousness... 1944

It is the natural and proper tendency of information to ripen into knowledge, just as knowledge itself is not complete: until it is systematized into science. Henry Barnard, 1879

The child may be said to feel, or be conscious of, all that enters the eye or the ear; but a specializing, or selective, consciousness is needed in order to convert any portion of this into knowledge. Alexander Bain, 1875

But this has nothing to do with the way the words or concepts of information etc. are used

