



UC Berkeley School of Information

Fun with "information"

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Infosys 103
History of Information
8/29/07



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”

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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"

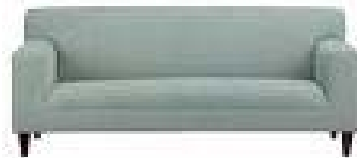
History 3493 (U. of Oklahoma) The Cultural History of Information. Prerequisite: junior standing or permission of instructor.

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"





Non-IT

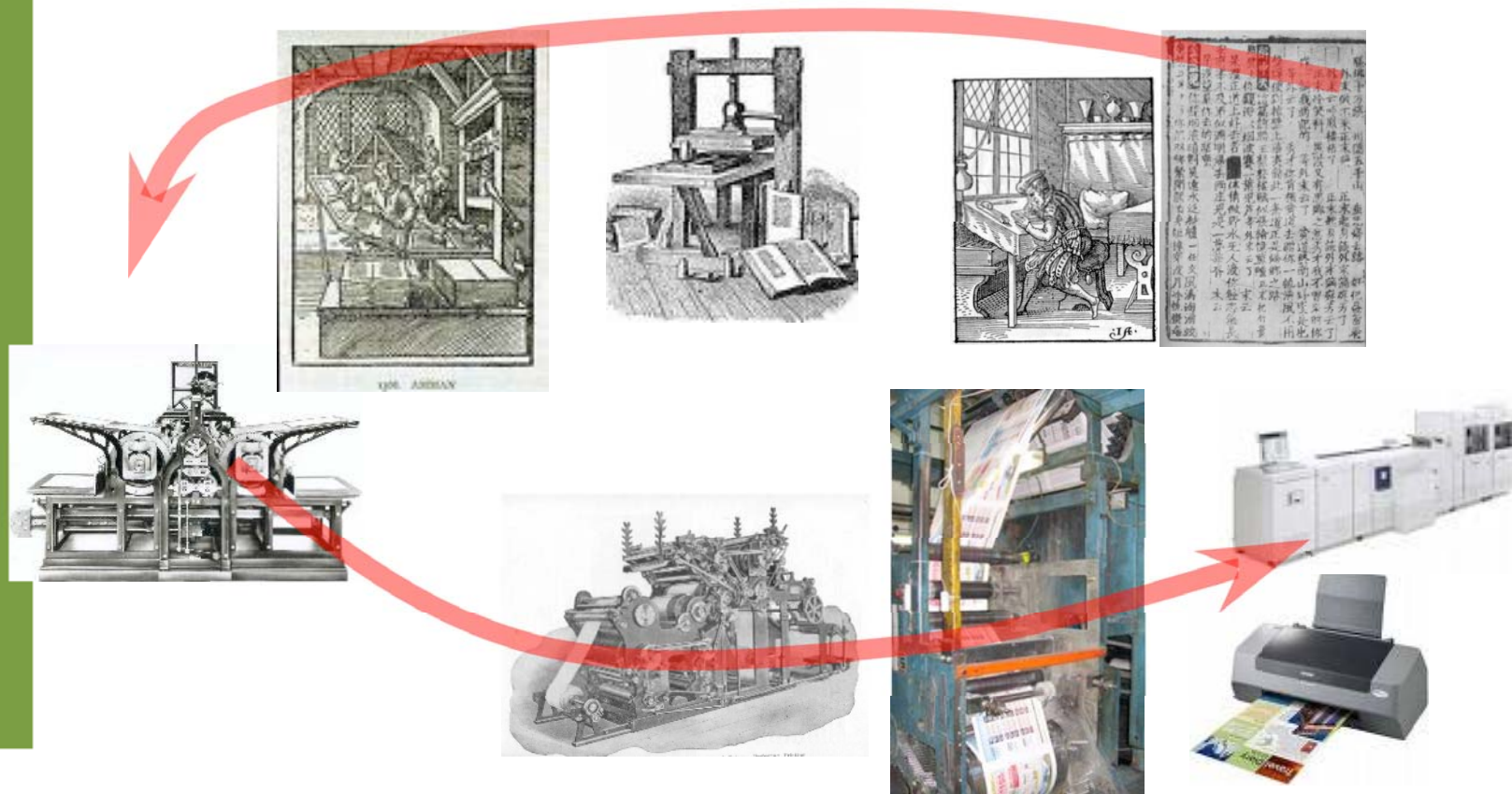
What isn't IT?





A "Natural" Assumption:

History of Information = Tracing ancestry of prototypical instances of IT

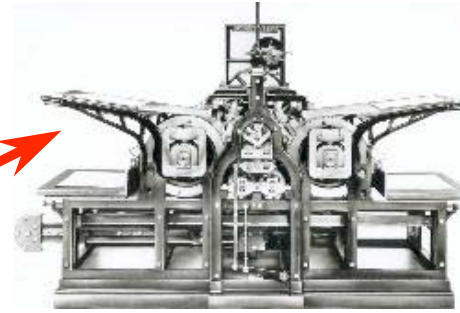




Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies



18th c. Press



Times Printing Press -- 1814

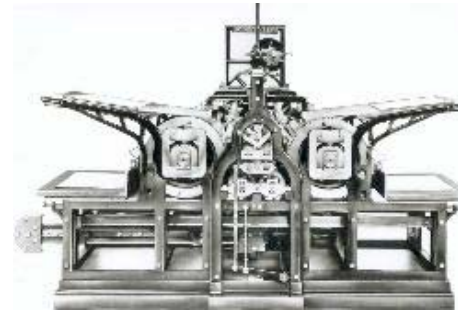


17th c. Press

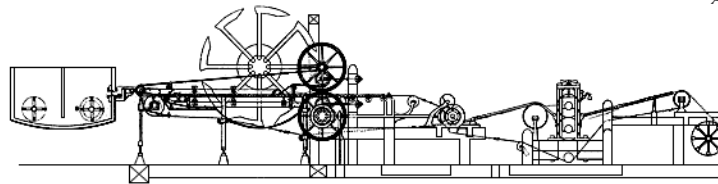
One way to tell the "history of printing"



Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies



Times Printing Press -- 1814

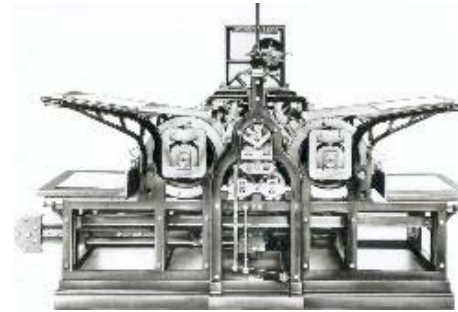


Foudrinier Machine, 1811

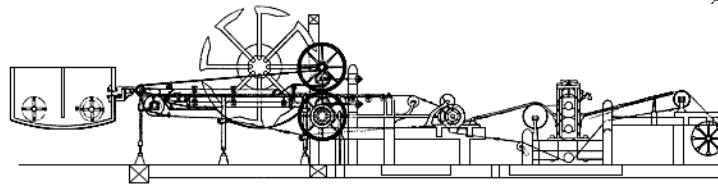




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Times Printing Press -- 1814



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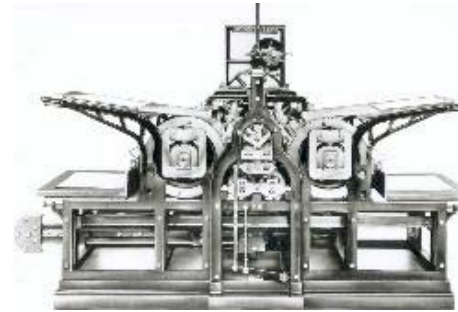


Stephenson's
Rocket, 1827

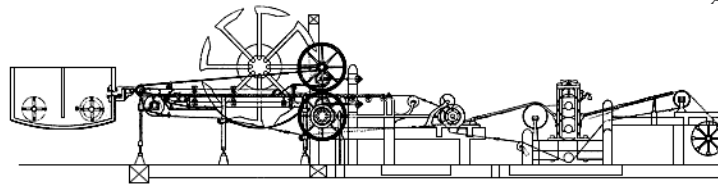




Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies



Times Printing Press -- 1814



Foudrinier Machine, 1811



Strap-iron rails

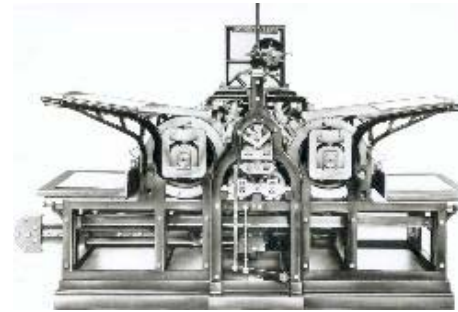


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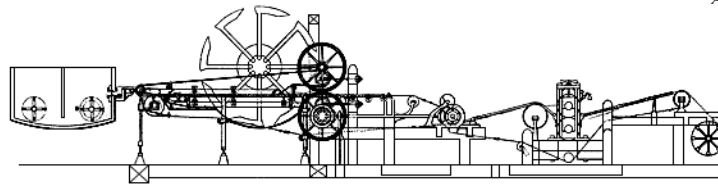




Complicating the Story, 1: The Interconnection of Technologies



Times Printing Press -- 1814



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Strap-iron rails



Stephenson's
Rocket, 1827



Every technology sits
in a technological
custard...



Rethinking "Information Technologies"





Rethinking "Information Technologies"

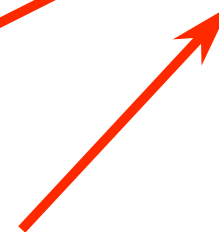




Rethinking "Information Technologies"



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Rethinking "Information Technologies"



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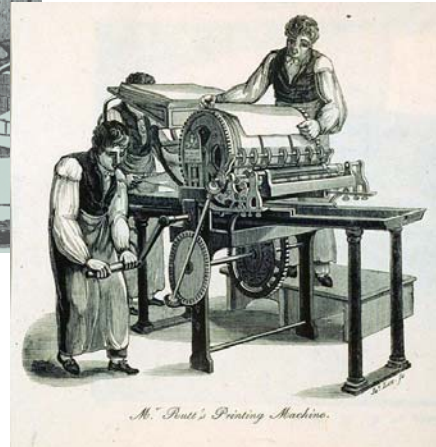




Complicating the Story, 2: The Social Setting of Technologies

The 19th c. newspaper required....

Specialization of
Skills



Specialization of
Commercial Roles

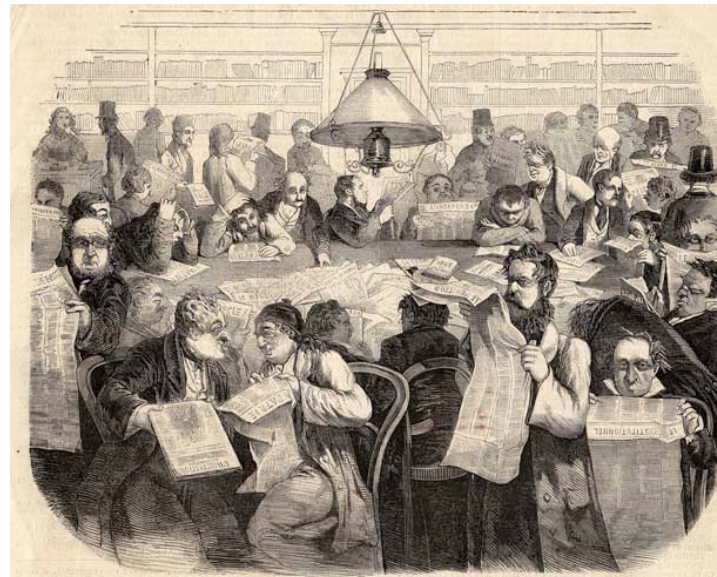




Complicating the Story, 2: The Social Setting of Technologies

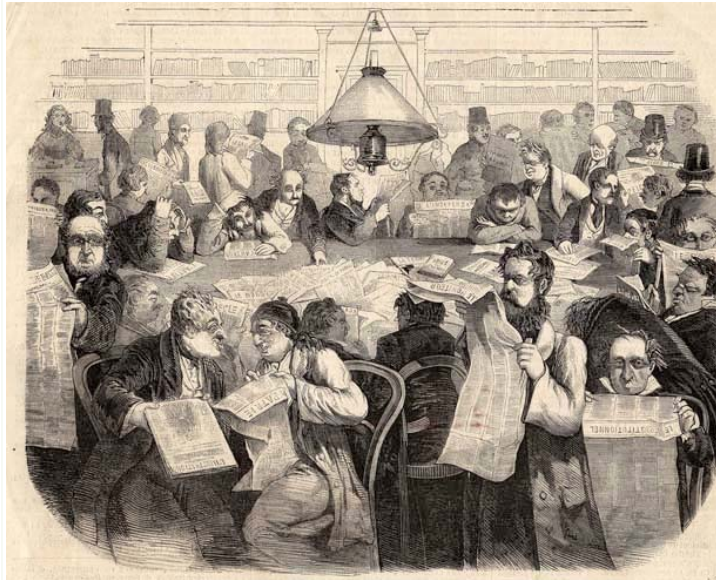
The 19th c. newspaper required....

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,"



Complicating the Story, 2: The Social Setting of Technologies



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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Medium:

“information” usually presumes a fixed medium of storage or transmission..

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...

Business Week, "The Information Revolution," 1994



The meanings of "information"

... 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.



The (Pre)history of "Information"

