

Chapters 8 through 10 focus on relatively recent issues within the American archival profession. At least two of these issues were not only contentious, but Cox himself helped to lead the charge. In 1997, SAA announced an executive decision to destroy the archives of its own Archives and Archivists Listserv. The ensuing controversy and eventual reversal of this decision, detailed in chapter 8, create an instructive case study that not only concerns professional identity, but also engages issues of appraisal and ethics. A similar, but more external, professional case in chapter 9 recounts the travails of a researcher on Presidential Libraries – Anthony Clark – who, when denied access to materials at the National Archives of the United States, appealed to SAA for assistance on the grounds of their code of ethics. In chapter 10, Cox takes on the archival finding aid, urging archivists to think ever more deeply about the stories they are telling.

In the final three chapters, Cox resumes the more personal tone of the first three, as he focuses on the themes at the centre of his own archival calling. The responsibilities of educators in this age of archival anxiety, the challenges of appraisal in a shifting landscape of history and memory and an ever-present sense of ethics all lead Cox to what may well be a prime motivator of his entire career, as well as for this book, namely, ‘substantially moving the archival profession from a passive cultural discipline to one that stands at the center of our society’s concern for accurate information’ (p. 253). In his conclusion, he joins both calling and anxiety as he writes: ‘We live in difficult times, and being successful requires more effort and a tough-mindedness that many never anticipated when they responded to a call to enter the field’ (p. 259).

Written with humour and an engaging style, the variety and range of issues in this book and their analysis by one of the most prominent writers and thinkers in the archival profession today are all reasons to read it. At times, a very personal journey; at times, controversial and argumentative, in *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling*, Richard Cox rides his hobby horses, but also shows us excellent reasons why all archivists need to join him on that ride.

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**James Gleick**, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, Fourth Estate, London, 2011. 544 pp. ISBN 978 1 4000 9623 7. AUD\$30.00.

This wide-ranging survey of the history and development of the concept of information is an elegant, engaging and, I think, successful example of one of its main theses: we need (and need to be) intelligent curators, synthesisers and thinkers, in order to search, sift, filter, cross reference and distil meaning from the ever-increasing volumes of information coming from an ever-increasing number of disparate data sources.

A delight of this book is its wonderful range of material. We travel back and forth in time, while Gleick teases out his themes, the continuities and disjunctions, as the world becomes more connected and the flow of information becomes a flood, a deluge, a glut.

Gleick starts by discussing the disappearing art of African talking drums, as an example of using a coding system to transmit information. He contends that ‘Every new medium transforms the nature of human thought’. He discusses the misgivings of Socrates about writing usurping the oral tradition and how printing made knowledge more widespread, stable and secure. We sweep through the development of the telegraph, telephone, transistor, computer, Internet, email and Twitter. It is a heady ride.

He enlivens discussion of philosophy, linguistics, logic, mathematics, quantum computing, Chaos Theory, genetics, entropy, and information and computer theory, with the brilliant, colourful characters and misfits that have been involved in advances in these fields. We meet Charles Babbage, whose ‘difference engine’ was the first prototype computer and his collaborator, Ada Lovelace, who envisaged the first computer program. Gleick introduces Claude Shannon, who wrote the seminal papers on information theory. Shannon and Alan Turing both worked on cracking Nazi codes during World War II and were driving forces behind the development of the first computers. Turing was a brilliant mathematician, whose life was tragically cut short when he committed suicide after he was convicted of homosexuality in the 1950s. He invented the universal computer, the Turing machine and the Turing test – both well described in the book. We meet Richard Dawkins, who coined the term ‘meme’ to describe contagious self-replicating ideas – the cultural counterparts of genes, perhaps the ultimate meme.

There are some omissions. Some reviewers have complained that newspapers and journalism are neglected. There is no direct mention of the role that archivists have in preserving information, its context and its meaning.

In the final chapters on the information flood, Gleick explores the need to adapt to the changing information landscape and to update our ideas, in light of new knowledge. As technology develops, information becomes more persistent, and forgetting becomes more difficult. This is both a blessing and a curse. According to Gleick, ‘Forgetting used to be a failing, a waste, a sign of senility. Now it takes effort. It may be as important as remembering’. Maybe archivists can contribute their skills in controlled forgetting to help winnow the wheat from the chaff and, mixing metaphors, create some islands of meaning in the flood of information? Gleick invokes Jorge Luis Borges’ 1941 story of the ‘Library of Babel’ that:

contains all books, in all languages ... Yet no knowledge can be discovered there, precisely because all knowledge *is* there shelved side by side with all falsehood. In the mirrored shelves can be found everything and nothing.

In the last, eloquent sentences of the book, he states, in summary:

We walk the corridors searching the shelves and rearranging them, looking for lines of meaning amid leagues of cacophony and incoherence, reading the history of the past and the future, collecting our thoughts and collecting the thoughts of others, every so often glimpsing mirrors, in which we may recognise creatures of the information.

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