The Future of Information History

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ABSTRACT

This panel discusses developments in the scholarship of information history and speculates on its future. Previously, history was a distinct mode of research and a specialty community within information science; it operated largely outside of the mainstream scholarship that was underway within the dominant empirical and rational paradigms. Today, more social and culturally-oriented approaches have gained momentum across the discipline and these frameworks include an historical perspective as one dimension of their conceptual apparatus. As a result, an historical sensibility is now embedded more broadly across a larger swath of scholarship. This is an exciting and welcome development for champions of history—but it is also problematical. The new historical dimension to research is diffuse and its practitioners typically do not identify as historians. To illustrate the new ambiguous place: there is no obvious home for this historical panel in the track-based program structure of the ASIS&T annual meeting. From a variety of angles, our panel traces the recent breakthrough and mainstreaming of history and aims to characterize its new face. The panel includes a classically trained historian, a theorist, and two scholars whose research features historical themes but is centered outside an historical specialty. A concluding discussion among panelists and the audience will be guided by a big question: What is the future of information history?

Keywords

History, theoretical foundations, disciplinary structure

THE PANEL

After a brief introduction by Jenna Hartel, each panelist will speak for a maximum of 12 minutes, as ordered below, and be timed. Following the presentations, there will be a 30 minute discussion period that will be moderated by Thomas Haigh.

Thomas Haigh, Associate Professor, School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee

Dr. Haigh received his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in the History and Sociology of Science. He is the author of “The History of Information Technology” in the Annual Review of Information Science and Technology (Haigh, 2011). As a point of departure for the panel’s thesis, Dr. Haigh will ask why and how we study the past. He will then outline the current set of overlapping scholarly communities concerned with information history, before sketching arguments for and against the panel’s thesis that historical perspectives are often embedded in our field’s emerging research practices.

Ron Day, Associate Professor, School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University

Dr. Day’s research concerns the philosophy, history, politics, and culture of information, documentation, knowledge, and communication in the 20th and into the 21st centuries in the U.S. and Western Europe. Day will discuss the relative marginal status of traditional historical narrative from the library and information science field. He will then describe the emergence of works by some older, but by largely younger, scholars that understand historical analysis more complexly and more embedded in the analysis of technical and social systems.
Jenna Hartel, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto
Dr. Hartel has broad interests in the history, theory, and method of library and information science, but her research is centered in the specialty of information behavior. Her presentation will display the potential for an historical dimension in the study of information behavior. Drawing upon her dissertation, a scientific ethnography of information phenomena in the hobby of gourmet cooking in the United States (Hartel, 2007), she will discuss three historical themes within the project: 1.) the shifting of information behavior research from academic and work environments to everyday life, 2.) the evolution of culinary genres such as the recipe over the past century, and 3.) the importance of culinary keepsakes that are passed down through generations.

Siobhan Stevenson, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto
Dr. Stevenson works in the area of critical information policy studies within the context of library and information science. As a political economist, she situates the objects of her research (be they institutions like libraries, workers like librarians, or state and corporate information and communications policies) within the history of capitalism’s evolution from a nascent industrialism. Through her presentation—comparing and contrasting the ideological dimensions of Andrew Carnegie’s library philanthropy with that of Bill Gates—she will demonstrate the interpretive potential of a perspective on contemporary conditions as historically continuous. As will become clear during her talk, such a perspective enhances our ability to identify the existence of alternative solutions to pressing social problems moving into the future.

Discussion Question
After the panelists’ presentations the moderator will raise the question: What is the future of information history?

REFERENCES
