

*Information history in the modern world: Histories of the
information age*

**(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 208 pp., bibl., index.
ISBN: 9780230237377)**

Toni Weller

Archie L Dick
University of Pretoria
archie.dick@up.ac.za

Researching and teaching the role of information in national development should become more transnational in outlook. Few studies probe the roles that information played in the historical development of nation-states, as well as of empires, and how networks of information disturb ideas of fixed geographical boundaries. These topics are not new in historical scholarship more generally (Bayly 1996; Said 1993). But information history, a youthful area of inquiry suggesting “a richness of unexplored avenues” (Weller 2011: 9), brings new possibilities.

Chief among them are a better understanding of the “shifting qualities of information itself”, and a better understanding of the past and the present (Tredinnick 2011: 193). How we frame these understandings, however, is not without difficulties. This is apparent in Toni Weller’s edited collection of essays on information history from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. She draws interesting conclusions from the interactions between oral and print

cultures in France, England, and Denmark and the shift from pre-modern to modern understandings of information. She concludes that this shift marked the explicit recognition of information as a defining feature in the modern world, or of divorcing information from content, “as opposed to forming an implicit part of rhetorical discourse” (Weller 2011: 201).

One may ask, however, why such a demarcation is necessary. Based largely on the experiences of some European countries, are others around the world expected to pass through “pre-modern”, “modern” and “post-modern” shifts in a linear fashion? How are countries where oral and print cultures were disrupted or erased to be characterized? And, how does information geography feature in this information history? These questions take up Weller’s commendable claim that “the plural is significant”, and that there are “alternate histories” instead of “a single history of information” (Weller 2011: 2, 9). A transnational perspective makes information histories sensitive to information geographies, emphasizing the idea of place and complicating issues of information development and underdevelopment.

Adding the geographical focus brings into view also themes of expansionism, trade, migration, information networks, and it connects information histories with wider understandings of the past. Some examples include: the data recording methods of the Roman army; methods of encrypting legal documents related to the Asian Silk Road in the third and fourth centuries; information and disinformation in the establishment of the Mongolian empire; early warning systems and the Hospitallers in the eastern Mediterranean; Dutch navigational knowledge of Japan in the early seventeenth century; and files on Prussian army conscripts in the early eighteenth century (Giannakopoulos 2011: 87-92). Continuities and changes in the methods of information collection, organization, dissemination, as well as the information systems and services that characterized information development in the nation-states shaped by these dramatic events will be instructive to many historians.

The movements of goods and people, as well as of oral and print cultures, are usually understood along the historical and geographical lines drawn by powerful blocs although scholarship from Africa, India, and Latin America are still generally kept apart. Alternative approaches, on the other hand, bring them together to introduce richer perspectives of information development (Delmas and Penn 2011; Gupta *et al*). These are the kinds of information histories and information geographies that are likely to bring symmetry to the history of European expansion, and to promote a generally more balanced

history. They will, for example, dispel the view expressed in a UNESCO document on knowledge societies that Africa is a “continent of oral tradition” (Towards knowledge societies 2005: 36). Diagne (2008: 19) points out that this view that “African cultures are oral cultures in essence” fails to take account of the Timbuktu manuscripts and libraries, Islamic scholarship in Africa, the adoption of Arabic script, and Africa’s written culture.

Timbuktu, in modern day Mali, was a centre of learning as far back as the eleventh century, with a high point in the sixteenth century. Going back even further is the Libyan script, an African native alphabet, which was used to write down ancient Libyan. Found on tombstones, it dates back more than two thousand years and is still used today by the Tuareg in its current form as the Tifinagh language (Le Quellec 2011: 8). Much remains to be done, but these are indications of some of the ways in which information was organized and distributed in Africa.

Weller’s collection of essays on information history is therefore a promising new area of research that will benefit from a transnational perspective that makes it sensitive to the idea of place. Further work on information histories and information geographies will enrich the contexts in which we understand how national information development unfolds.

References

- Bayly, C, 1996. *Empire and information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Delmas, A, and Penn, N (eds), 2011. *Written cultures in a colonial context: Africa and the Americas, 1500-1900*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Diagne, SB, 2008. Toward an intellectual history of West Africa: The meaning of Timbuktu. In: Jeppie, S and Diagne, SB (eds). *The meanings of Timbuktu*. Pretoria: HSRC Press: 19-27.
- Giannakopoulos, G, Sakas, DP, Vlachos, DS, and Kyriaki-Manessi, D (eds), 2011. *International conference on integrated information: Abstracts book*. Piraeus: X. Mpenou.
- Gupta, P, Hofmeyr, I, and Pearson M (eds), 2010. *Eyes across the water: Navigating the Indian ocean*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

Le Quellec, J 2011. Rock art, scripts and proto-scripts in Africa: The Libyco-Berber example. In: Delmas, A and Penn, N (eds). *Written cultures in a colonial context: Africa and the Americas, 1500-1900*. Cape Town: UCT Press: 3-29.

Said, E 1993. *Culture and imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Towards knowledge societies, 2005. Unesco Publishing. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001418/141843e.pdf>, as accessed 25 June 2012.

Tredinnick, L 2011. Re-writing history: The information age and the knowable past. In: Weller, T, (ed). *Information history in the modern world: Histories of the information age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan: 175-198.

Weller, T, (ed) 2011. *Information history in the modern world: Histories of the information age*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.