



When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700-1850

By Daniel R. Headrick

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Although the Information Age is often described as a new era, a cultural leap springing directly from the invention of modern computers, it is simply the latest step in a long cultural process. Its conceptual roots stretch back to the profound changes that occurred during the Age of Reason and Revolution. *When Information Came of Age* argues that the key to the present era lies in understanding the systems developed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to gather, store, transform, display, and communicate information.

The book provides a concise and readable survey of the many conceptual developments between 1700 and 1850 and draws connections to leading technologies of today. It documents three breakthroughs in information systems that date to the period: the classification and nomenclature of Linnaeus, the chemical system devised by Lavoisier, and the metric system. It shows how eighteenth-century political arithmeticians and demographers pioneered statistics and graphs as a means for presenting data succinctly and visually. It describes the transformation of cartography from art to science as it incorporated new methods for determining longitude at sea and new data on the measure the arc of the meridian on land. Finally, it looks at the early steps in codifying and transmitting information, including the development of dictionaries, the invention of semaphore telegraphs and naval flag signaling, and the conceptual changes in the use and purpose of postal services.

When Information Came of Age shows that like the roots of democracy and industrialization, the foundations of the Information Age were built in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

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Editorial Review

Review

"An original, lucid synthesis, one that serves to remind us that today's controversies often have long pedigrees. Many of our debates on Internet privacy and encryption, for instance, have their origins in the postal service and legislative controversies of the French Revolution. The recounting of the history of power and information has only begun, and this book is an outstanding contribution."--*The Wilson Quarterly*

"One of the myths of the computer era is that it is our age that invented Information Technology. In a book that is as timely as it is scholarly, Dan Headrick shows how the age of enlightenment discovered 'information' as a systematic way of organizing the things we know. Information technologies preceded industrialization and clearly played a major role in the emergence of modern production techniques and the democratic institutions of free market. Headrick is one of the most imaginative and original minds working on historical questions today."--Joel Mokyr, Northwestern University

"Information processing is not a recent invention. Indeed, it is as old as human speech. Headrick's path-breaking book shows us, with admirable precision, how information processing assumed new forms and reshaped European and American society between 1700 and 1850."--William H. McNeill, University of Chicago (Emeritus) "Anyone interested in the historical roots of the present Information Age should read *When Information Came of Age*." *Daniel Headrick argues convincingly that the modern attitudes toward information that we take for granted had their start in the 18th century. From dictionaries to maps to classification schemes in natural history and chemistry, Headrick explains how and why scientists and humanists began to think about information in new ways--and how these new ways of thinking about information made possible the present Information Age.*--Steven Lubar, Smithsonian National Museum of American History

"It is already a commonplace to refer to our time as the 'Information Age' and most people would probably associate it with the diffusion of computing technology. Headrick does a masterful job in *When Information Came of Age* of showing that the roots of this age lie deep in profound changes in the methods of handling information that occurred a long time ago. The lesson is important because in nurturing innovation it is necessary to realize that new gadgets are only a superficial manifestation of the really revolutionary things happening out of sight."--Juan D. Rogers, Georgia Institute of Technology

"When *Information Came of Age* is an excellent addition to the growing collection of studies on the origins of 'our' Information Age. Headrick clearly demonstrates that a revolution occurred in the organization and presentation of information long before the arrival of the computer. This is an important book."--James M. Cortada, IBM and author of *Before the Computer*

"A treasure trove of information, well written and well illustrated, and is full of evidence to dispel the myth that Information Technology began in the 20th century."--*First Monday*

About the Author

Daniel R. Headrick is Professor of Social Science and History at Roosevelt University and author of numerous books on world history, including *The Invisible Weapon*, *The Tentacles of Progress*, and *The Tools of Empire*.

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