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Review of "The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power"

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Published version. Review of *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power* by Ronald Day, Vol. 63, No. 3 (May 2002): 291-92. [Permalink](#). © 2002 American Library Association. Used with permission.

texts were preserved in the palaces and university libraries of the eastern empire, it was in monasteries that a dedication to reading and libraries was reborn.

The big technological breakthrough in ancient books was the adoption of the codex, which developed from wooden writing tablets bound together to form a notebook. Parchment soon replaced wood, although papyrus codexes also existed for a time. The Roman satirist Martial (first century A.D.) refers to the new format in the lines:

*This bulky mass of multiple folds
all fifteen poems of Ovid holds.*

The codex was more compact, durable, and convenient to use but did not completely replace the traditional roll for several centuries. The fact that Christians used the codex exclusively probably expedited its victory.

Casson's is not the first history of ancient libraries. James Westfall Thompson's *Ancient Libraries* (1940) is a standard, and H. L. Pinner's *The World of Books in Classical Antiquity* (1958) is a charming little work for the general reader. But *Libraries in the Ancient World* is surely the best current work on the subject. Several studies of the Library at Alexandria have appeared lately, and the British Library recently published a gigantic illustrated work, *The Great Libraries: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, by Konstantinos Sp. Staikos. But Casson's book would be the choice for the reader who wants not only to learn about ancient libraries, but also to experience the humanity of the people who lived in societies so different, and yet so close, to our own.—*Jean Alexander, Carnegie-Mellon University.*

Day, Ronald E. *The Modern Invention of Information: Discourse, History, and Power.* Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Pr., 2001. 139p. \$35 alk. paper (ISBN 0809323907). LC 00-047033. Although "information" receives widespread usage among librarians, the word itself has received modest attention in the historical and cultural contexts of library

and information science. Ronald E. Day, a professor in the Library and Information Science Program at Wayne State University, has written in *The Modern Invention of Information*, a cogent analysis of information in a society that takes the very word itself for granted.

Day begins this important new book by writing, "No historical account of information in the twentieth century can turn away from the problem of how a rhetoric, an aesthetic, and consequently, an ideology of information has come to shape late modern history and historiography." He argues "not only that the history of information has been forgotten but also that it must be forgotten within any 'metaphysics' or ideology of information, because information in modernity connotes a factuality and pragmatic presence ... that erases or radically reduces ambiguity and the problems of reading, interpreting, and constructing history." Day leads the reader through a careful and close reading of the texts of eminent theorists and philosophers, from Paul Otlet and Suzanne Briet to Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, to reveal the rhetorical and historical devices that link science to information in theory and practice.

Although sensitive, at times, to historicism, Day's approach to the topic of information is not one of narrative history. A substantial portion of the book is devoted to an inquiry into the rhetorical strategies utilized by the European Documentalists Otlet and Briet, Warren Weaver, Norbert Wiener, and, more recently, Pierre Levy in his theories of cyberspace and "the virtual." Through examination of key texts by Otlet and Briet, including work by Briet yet to be translated into English, Day presents a framework for reading information as a "trope" for science. Accordingly, information becomes a rhetorical strategy for defining the role and locating the work of librarians and documentalists in scientific discourse and culture. In Weaver and Wiener, one finds a link between communication and scientific information in their articulation of a scientific theory of com-

munication, a link that is essential to the development of a post-World War Two global exchange of ideas through communication networks.

Day analyzes Levy's use of the word *virtual* both through an examination of the influence of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on Levy's work and by an explication of Levy's arguments concerning the relationship between capitalism and the construction of information. Finally, Day explores the ways in which Heidegger critiqued information culture's model of language and truth and Benjamin's "engagement with the congruence of aesthetics, history, knowledge and technical reproduction in the modern phenomena of public information." Day's critique of Benjamin's observations from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is especially pertinent to today as one considers the shattering effects of the industrial age, and in particular, the development of mass communication's technical reproduction, on local knowledge. A return to Benjamin's project has surprising resonance in our present era of "creative destruction," a term used by Joseph Schumpeter and made current by Alan Greenspan to describe the continuous "scrapping" of old technologies for new ones.

This is a pretty demanding book, yet Day is engaged in more than an academic exercise in the hermeneutics of information. He also challenges our profession to think carefully about the word *information* and its use when he writes, "Information professionals and theorists question very little what information is, why it should be valued, or why it is an economic and social 'good.'" The word *information* is applied to literacy, equity of access, and freedom, as well as to policy statements and initiatives, yet rarely challenged "with any social, political, and historical depth"; both meaning and connotation are taken at face value. *The Modern Invention of Information* is worth reading for those who wish to explore its deeper meaning.—William Welburn, *The University of Iowa*.

Jackson, H. J. *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale Univ. Pr., 2001. 324p. \$27.95, alk. paper (ISBN 0300088167). LC 00-043721.

Historically, librarians have had little tolerance for notes scribbled in book margins, seeing no pardonable difference between them and other forms of book defacement. Transgressors have not had an easy time of it at the hands of our professional ancestors. For example, 2,700 years ago, Ashurbanipal's librarians called down the wrath of Adad and Ishtar on the heads of tablet defacers, and during the Middle Ages, monastic librarians placed "anathemas" (curses) and other drastic injunctions in books to dissuade potential abusers. Throughout history, it is clear, members of our profession have had nothing but evil thoughts and threats (and replacement fees) for self-styled book improvers, witty emendators, underliners, and moustacheurs.

Whether we like it or not, however, marginalia and the many other forms of spontaneous, often subversive reader reactions found in "author-ized" texts are in and have become the darling of historians and literary scholars. Consider, for example, Alexander J. Peden's *Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt* (Brill 2001), in which demotic scribblings found in Egyptian tombs are described as a "more accurate reflection of the character of the Egyptian era of the pharaohs than the far more polished artistic or literary works" they appear next to. Another recent work, *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work*, by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo (Univ. of Victoria 2001), subjects the marginalia of medieval clerics and scribes (one known only as the "Red Ink Annotator," as if he were some daring and mysterious bandit) to careful and revealing study, yielding a veritable "taxonomy of marginalia in late medieval English manuscripts" and contributing to a "recovery of medieval reader response."

So is it okay now to scribble in books? Well, if you ask a frontline librarian, no, it still isn't. Exceptions will be granted