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The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood

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Synopsis

James Gleick, the author of the best sellers Chaos and Genius, now brings us a work just as astonishing and masterly: a revelatory chronicle and meditation that shows how information has become the modern era's defining quality "the blood, the fuel, the vital principle of our world. The story of information begins in a time profoundly unlike our own, when every thought and utterance vanishes as soon as it is born. From the invention of scripts and alphabets to the long-misunderstood talking drums of Africa, Gleick tells the story of information technologies that changed the very nature of human consciousness. He provides portraits of the key figures contributing to the inexorable development of our modern understanding of information: Charles Babbage, the idiosyncratic inventor of the first great mechanical computer; Ada Byron, the brilliant and doomed daughter of the poet, who became the first true programmer; pivotal figures like Samuel Morse and Alan Turing; and Claude Shannon, the creator of information theory itself. And then the information age arrives. Citizens of this world become experts willy-nilly: aficionados of bits and bytes. And we sometimes feel we are drowning, swept by a deluge of signs and signals, news and images, blogs and tweets. The Information is the story of how we got here and where we are heading. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

James Gleick, a prominent journalist, biographer of scientists and explainer of physics has usefully turned his attention to the single most important phenomena of the twenty-first century, the study

and quantification of information. This book explains, provides a historical context and gives biographies of the most important explorers of information phenomena throughout the centuries. Gleick provides biographical sketches of lesser known figures in the history of information such as Robert Caudrey compiler of the first known English dictionary and John F. Carrington chronicler of "The Talking Drums of Africa"; he (Gleick) gives fuller personal histories of Samuel F. Morse, Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace; Gleick reserves the most extensive biographical treatment for those who "mathematized" the phenomena of information: Claude Shannon and Alan Turing. Gleick, a science journalist and chronicler of physics provides interesting background material and simple enough explanations for anyone who wishes to learn about the areas of information theory that influence our times, technologies and businesses. He also gives enough detail for the interested undergraduate student whose field is not primarily in the sciences. But, the unification of science, phenomena, history and biography is also of considerable interest to those like myself who have extensive training in the "information sciences" but seek a wider context for their previously acquired knowledge. One slight criticism, I have for this otherwise excellent and comprehensive review of the theory of information and its history, is in the area of its relation to physics and the structure of the world (universe).

I recommend this book's discussion of information theory, a topic that is sadly underrepresented in the popular press. Gleick provides a decent historical overview of Shannon and Turing, and the book starts to pick up steam when discussing Norbert Wiener and cybernetics. The subsequent chapter on informational and thermodynamic entropy is an excellent non-mathematical overview of a tricky topic. It is only surpassed by Chapter 12, which is a fascinating elucidation of algorithmic information theory, which as Chaitin put it, was "the result of putting Shannon's information theory and Turing's computability theory into a cocktail shaker and shaking vigorously." It's unsurprising that this is Gleick's strength, due to his earlier writing on chaos. Unfortunately the rest of the book falls far short of this strong standard. Gleick attempts to tackle too much, offering forgettable takes on topics including dictionaries, telegraphs, Charles Babbage, Wikipedia, memes, and information surfeit. These topics are not well-anchored to the central topic of information theory, and serve to muddle the work. But most disappointingly, the chapters on biology (Ch. 10) and quantum physics (Ch. 13) leave a ton to be desired. Gleick barely scratches the surface of the application of information theory to biology (particularly neuroscience), and the discussion of quantum information begs many more questions to be answered. What Gleick does introduce about these topics is disjointed and in need of serious editing. For instance, Gleick introduces Christopher Fuchs and

quantum information theory, but before the discussion really goes anywhere, he shifts to a cursory discussion of black holes and information before shifting to an equally vacuous discussion of quantum computation and teleportation.

Where did the telegraph, telephone and computers come from anyway? Author James Gleick's new book, "The Information" sheds light inside the black box. In a revealing work, backed by painstaking research, James Gleick, has combed the archives to show us some absorbing details and insights on how the structure of information progressed from clay tablets to telegraph to cloud technology. This is a hefty book, but its theme can be shortly stated. Mr. Gleick believes "in the long run, history is the story of information becoming aware of itself." Context can be everything in historical interpretation, as James Gleick makes clear in his convincing prolog that "the alphabet was a founding technology of information; the telephone, the fax machine, the calculator and, ultimately the computer are only the latest innovations devised for saving, manipulating, and communicating knowledge." Mr. Gleick's narrative builds into a fulfilling and thought-provoking story. The author begins with the amazing tale of how African drums communicated, then shifts to Robert Cawdrey's "Table Alphabeticall in 1604. He shows us how time and space are minimized and global consciousness realized. At more than 500 pages, with few illustrations, this book looks terrifying. But the pages dissolve quickly as Mr. Gleick introduces us to a range of vivid characters, such as colorful Charles Babbage, the inventor of the ever growing difference machine in 1822. After twenty years of development it weighed 15 tons with over 25,000 precision parts. But by 1842 the British government had grown weary of Babbage's pork barrel project. "What shall we do to get rid of Mr. Babbage and his calculating machine?" asked Prime Minister Robert Peel.

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