



The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood

By James Gleick

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The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood By James Gleick

From the bestselling author of the acclaimed *Chaos* and *Genius* comes a thoughtful and provocative exploration of the big ideas of the modern era: Information, communication, and information theory.

Acclaimed science writer James Gleick presents an eye-opening vision of how our relationship to information has transformed the very nature of human consciousness. A fascinating intellectual journey through the history of communication and information, from the language of Africa's talking drums to the invention of written alphabets; from the electronic transmission of code to the origins of information theory, into the new information age and the current deluge of news, tweets, images, and blogs. Along the way, Gleick profiles key innovators, including Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace, Samuel Morse, and Claude Shannon, and reveals how our understanding of information is transforming not only how we look at the world, but how we live.

A *New York Times* Notable Book

**A *Los Angeles Times* and *Cleveland Plain Dealer* Best Book of the Year
Winner of the PEN/E. O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award**

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, March 2011: In a sense, *The Information* is a book about everything, from words themselves to talking drums, writing and lexicography, early attempts at an analytical engine, the telegraph and telephone, ENIAC, and the ubiquitous computers that followed. But that's just the "History." The "Theory" focuses on such 20th-century notables as Claude Shannon, Norbert Wiener, Alan Turing, and others who worked on coding, decoding, and re-coding both the meaning and the myriad messages transmitted via the media of their times. In the "Flood," Gleick explains genetics as biology's mechanism for informational exchange--Is a chicken just an egg's way of making another egg?--and discusses self-replicating memes (ideas as different as earworms and racism) as information's own evolving meta-life forms. Along the way, readers learn about music and quantum mechanics, why forgetting takes work, the meaning of an "interesting number," and why "[t]he bit is the ultimate unsplitable particle." What results is a visceral sense of information's contemporary precedence as a way of understanding the world, a physical/symbolic palimpsest of self-propelled exchange, the universe itself as the ultimate analytical engine. If Borges's "Library of Babel" is literature's iconic cautionary tale about the extreme of informational overload, Gleick sees the opposite, the world as an endlessly unfolding opportunity in which "creatures of the information" may just recognize themselves. --*Jason Kirk*

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In 1948, Bell Laboratories announced the invention of the electronic semiconductor and its revolutionary ability to do anything a vacuum tube could do but more efficiently. While the revolution in communications was taking these steps, Bell Labs scientist Claude Shannon helped to write a monograph for them, *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*, in which he coined the word bit to name a fundamental unit of computer information. As bestselling author Gleick (*Chaos*) astutely argues, Shannon's neologism profoundly changed our view of the world; his brilliant work introduced us to the notion that a tiny piece of hardware could transmit messages that contained meaning and that a physical unit, a bit, could measure a quality as elusive as information. Shannon's story is only one of many in this sprawling history of information. With his brilliant ability to synthesize mounds of details and to tell rich stories, Gleick leads us on a journey from one form of communicating information to another, beginning with African tribes' use of drums and including along the way scientists like Samuel B. Morse, who invented the telegraph; Norbert Wiener, who developed cybernetics; and Ada Byron, the great Romantic poet's daughter, who collaborated with Charles Babbage in developing the first mechanical computer. Gleick's exceptional history of culture concludes that information is indeed the blood, the fuel, and the vital principle on which our world runs.

(Apr.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Acutely sensitive to the human drama involved in pioneering thought and discovery, best-selling science and technology writer Gleick has developed an epic sense of humankind's quest for mastery of information, "the vital principle." In this tour de force, the first book to fully chronicle the story of information and how it has transformed human thought and life, Gleick follows the path from the ingenious codes used by African drummers to the invention of the alphabet and writing, which made possible deep analysis and logic, the bedrock for information theory. As Gleick elucidates the roles cryptography, libraries, quantum physics, and molecular biology play in information science and tracks the cresting waves that rapidly delivered the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, computer, and Internet, he vividly profiles a compelling cast of geniuses. There's prescient Charles Babbage and witty, surpassingly gifted Ada Byron

King, logic master George Boole, and the too-little-known Claude Shannon, whose "elegant solutions" include designating the "bit" as "the smallest possibly quantity of information." Gleick is equally illuminating in his explications of such forces key to information as uncertainty, entropy, memes, and randomness. This is intellectual history of tremendous verve, insight, and significance. Unfailingly spirited, often poetic, Gleick recharges our astonishment over the complexity and resonance of the digital sphere and ponders our hunger for connectedness. **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** Destined to be a science classic, best-seller Gleick's dynamic history of information will be one of the biggest nonfiction books of the year. -- Donna Seaman

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gregory Proctor:

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