Whether termed the ‘network society’, the ‘knowledge society’ or the ‘information society’, it is widely accepted that a new age has dawned, unveiled by powerful computer and communication technologies. Yet for millennia humans have been recording knowledge and culture, engaging in informational activity. Following the invention of writing around 10,000 years ago, the first libraries (repositories of clay tablets) appeared in the third millennium BC. Thereafter, the emergence of the codex (the format of the book) around 2,000 years ago, the arrival of printing in the fifteenth century, the invention of the electric telegraph in the nineteenth century and the proliferation of audio-visual technologies – radio, film and television – in the twentieth century each represented a quantum leap forward in the history of the communication of information. The information society can hardly be said to be new: in a way, it is possible to argue that most ‘civilised’ societies have been informational ones. In assessing the social importance of information historically, it is our contention that continuities outweigh discontinuities. In short, the epochal nature of the information society is a myth – certainly when compared to other immensely important and fundamental shifts in human culture and relations, such as the emergence of capitalism or of modernity.

We bring to this study knowledge and insights drawn from our respective backgrounds and current interests in history, sociology and library and information science; in the pages that follow, each of us exploits these disciplines in various combinations and degrees. However, the specific springboard for this book has been our perception that the field of library and information science in the UK has taken too little account of its roots and heritage. This is, of course, much less true of libraries and print culture (a vibrant history of which has developed over the past half a century) than it is of information science, information policy and what we refer to today as the information professions. A dearth of research on the history of information management (IM) is also apparent. A limited definition of information management focuses upon the arrangements made by organisations (market and non-market) for the internal ordering and communication of information, and in this book we certainly address the history of this particular aspect of IM. However, as reflected in the sub-title of the book, we also conceptualise information management more broadly, to encompass the envisioning, construction and management – by the state, capital, organisations and the professions – of networks, institutions and infrastructures for the storage and dissemination of documents and information.

Our temporal focus is essentially the first half of the twentieth century, although reference is inevitably made to events and personalities either side of this period. We stress especially the existence of information management before the era of the computer, and certainly before its widespread application and visibility from the 1970s onwards. In specific terms, our work develops the perspectives of
historians such as James Beniger and Joanne Yates, who have argued that a revolution in the control and management of information took place broadly between 1870 and 1930. Like them, we hypothesise the development of an ‘early’ information society, specifically, in our case, in Britain. Between 1900 and 1960, we contend, British society developed both a recognisable infrastructure for managing information and became highly aware of its utility, value and significance.

One aspect of such an early information society deliberately outside the scope of this book concerns the rise of mass communications and mass media. In part, this is because many others better qualified than ourselves have charted the rise of the press and telecommunications, and the publication of another media history was never our intention. More specifically, however, as our sub-title suggests, our goal is to focus upon those social systems which were developed with the aim of managing information, rather than every aspect the history of communication. Of course, the age of high industrial modernity which we cover witnessed the development of postal services; global telegraph; a mass circulation press; telephone; radio; and, at the end of our period, television – and these technologies were fundamental in increasing both the speed and volume of the production and transmission of information. Our concern, however, is with the ways in which their products – new books; magazines; papers; records; cards; tapes and photographs – began to be organised and exploited, and with the extent to which a sphere of activity developed which reconceptualised them as ‘information’.

The intended audience for this book is primarily the world of library and information science, not only students, researchers and educators, but practitioners too. We believe the adoption of historical perspectives to be an important component of professional preparation and development in the field. Historical awareness contributes to an understanding of contemporary professional issues. History holds lessons for the future, and this is as true for expert practices as it is for society generally. Historical knowledge also contributes to professional standing in other, less overtly tangible, ways. It helps mould professional identity and adds to the self-reflection that any professional practice requires. It roots out past principles, thereby illuminating debates on philosophical purpose and ethical issues. It promotes the highly transferable skill of critical thinking and encourages societal awareness and a heightened knowledge of context. A sense of the past is always important, but at a time of flux, such as that currently being experienced in the library and information field, it is indispensable.

We also anticipate that our work will find an audience among sociologists and historians. The former, in a British context, notwithstanding some notable exceptions such as the work of Frank Webster, Kevin Robins and David Lyon, have been more concerned with critiquing and analysing the information society concept from a contemporary – and at most a contemporary history – perspective. Equally, historians, certainly in respect of Britain, though much less in an American context, have attended relatively infrequently to the question of the information society’s roots; although once again certain exceptions are noteworthy: witness contributions by Jon Agar, Martin Campbell-Kelly, Edward Higgs, Thomas Richards and Paul Slack, for example. In fact, in the absence of historians,
the historiography of the information society has often fallen to those who have a background in either history, historical sociology or political philosophy – scholars such as John Feather, Alistair Duff, Ian Cornelius and ourselves – but whose academic responsibility is, and has been for some time, essentially in education and research in library, information and communication studies.

The book is organised into four sections. In Part I we register our scepticism of the information society proposition and set out a methodology in support of our position. The approach we take – the mobilisation of history to undermine the claims of information society enthusiasts – draws on an emergent field of scholarship which we term ‘information history’, a brief definition of which is required and offered. We identify the history of information management as a specific strand of this embryonic discipline; and as a pointer to the rationale underpinning the remaining organisation of the book, mount an initial exploration of information management history in the context of state intervention, professionalisation in information work and the internal information activities of organisations. These issues are discussed mostly in the context of Britain. However, we are aware that initiatives and advocacy in Britain were not hermetically sealed from developments elsewhere. Part I therefore ends with a brief account of efforts in other countries to further information management and, more importantly, of schemes visualising the construction of truly international mechanisms for information control.

The focus of Part II is the role of the state, in reality and envisioned, in the emergence of an early information society in Britain. It almost goes without saying that we regard information – as a resource that can be produced, consumed and rationed – to be laden with political implications. In the first half of the twentieth century the importance of scientific and technical information to national well-being was raised a number of times by politicians, policy-makers and professionals, and also attracted the attention of a number of left-wing activists, especially the scientist J.D. Bernal. Given the conservatism of the British state during much of the period we are considering, it is not surprising that radical and large-scale schemes for information control did not win the support envisaged by their authors. Instead, the construction of Britain’s information infrastructure followed a piecemeal path, illustrated by the establishment and early history of the Association of Special Libraries and Information Bureaux (ASLIB) in 1924, an organisation whose main objective appears at first glance to have been the representation, alongside a variety of special librarians, of the emergent information occupations, but which upon closer inspection was the provision of a ‘national intelligence service’ for science, commerce and industry – in effect, a surrogate for more aggressive action in this regard by the state.

In Part III the discussion switches to the commercial sphere and its efforts to manage information in increasingly complex and large enterprises (although reference is also made to state agencies). Today’s interpretation of the term ‘information economy’ is of an economy driven by digital technologies and directed by a new class of knowledge worker. This interpretation is distinct from the narrower interpretation of the ‘information economy’ as the ‘information sector’, made up of a relatively small set of information industries such as software
development, the media, Internet providers and facilitators and libraries. If the wider interpretation noted above is to be accepted, then it is clear that its essential elements were already in place in the early twentieth century, as large-scale enterprises and organisations began to ‘learn’ and to grapple, systematically, with the problem of ordering and disseminating information internally, through such mechanisms as in-house information bureaux and libraries, company magazines, and a range of information management techniques and technologies.

In the final section of the book the existence of ‘information occupations’, decades before the term gained currency in the late twentieth century, is recognised and highlighted. Given that our current information professions – especially in areas like IT – are essentially male dominated, it is interesting to note that a number of women found work, at a fairly professional level, in the information bureaux and libraries of early twentieth-century enterprises, research associations and scientific societies. For such women, as well as men, however, entry into, and advancement in, information work (as distinct from traditional librarianship) was not fundamentally the result of dedicated education and training programmes. This said, opportunities for education and training in the information field did exist, and culminated towards the end of our period, in 1958, in the establishment of the Institute of Information Scientists, and from the early 1960s, degree courses in ‘information science’. These events, perhaps, might be said to mark a coming of age of the early information society, and hence, de facto, they mark an end point for this volume.

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