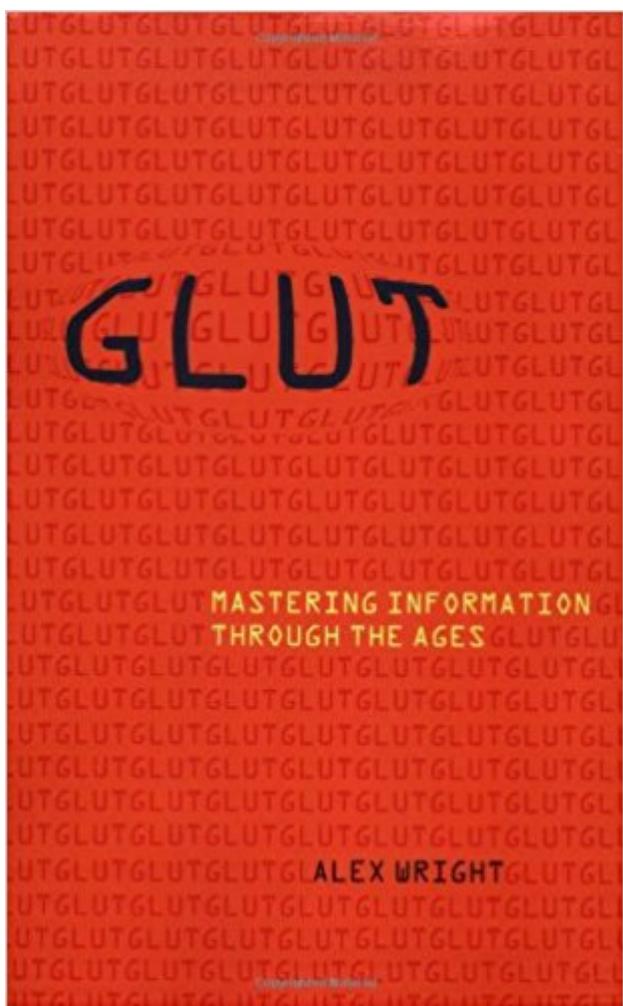


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# Glut: Mastering Information Through The Ages



## Synopsis

The "information explosion" may seem like an acutely modern phenomenon, but we are not the first generation—or even the first species—to wrestle with the problem of information overload. Long before the advent of computers, human beings were collecting, storing, and organizing information: from Ice Age taxonomies to Sumerian archives, Greek libraries to Dark Age monasteries. Spanning disciplines from evolutionary theory and cultural anthropology to the history of books, libraries, and computer science, Alex Wright weaves an intriguing narrative that connects such seemingly far-flung topics as insect colonies, Stone Age jewelry, medieval monasteries, Renaissance encyclopedias, early computer networks, and the Internet. Finally, he pulls these threads together to reach a surprising conclusion, suggesting that the future of the information age may lie deep in our past.

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## Customer Reviews

To counter the billions of pixels that have been spent on the rise of the seemingly unique World Wide Web, journalist and information architect Wright delivers a fascinating tour of the many ways that humans have collected, organized and shared information for more than 100,000 years to show how the information age started long before microchips or movable type. A self-described generalist who displays an easy familiarity with evolutionary biology and cultural anthropology as well as computer science and technology, Wright explores the many and varied roots of the Web, including how the structure of family relationships from Greek times, among others, has exerted a profound

influence on the shape and structure of human information systems. He discusses how the violent history of libraries is the best lesson in how hierarchical systems collapse and give rise to new systems, and how the new technology of the book introduced the notion of random access to information. And he focuses on the work of many now obscure information-gathering pioneers such as John Wilkins and his Universal Categories and Paul Otlet, the Internet's forgotten forefather, who anticipated many of the problems bedeviling the Web today. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Alex Wright delivers a fascinating tour of the many ways that humans have collected, organized, and shared information to show how the information age started long before microchips or movable type." ª Publishers Weekly "This stimulating book offers much opportunity to reflect on the nature and long history of information management as a damper to the panic or the elation we may variously feel as we face ever greater scales of information overload." ª Nature "Glut is a penetrating and highly entertaining meditation on our information age and its historical roots. Alex Wright argues that now is the time to take a hard look at how we have communicated with one another since coming down from the trees, because the way we organize knowledge determines much about how we live." ª Los Angeles Times Book Review "Glut is a readable romp through the history of information processing. Wright argues that advances in information technology have always sparked conflict between written and oral traditions." ª New Scientist "Glut defies classification. From Incan woven threads to Wikipedia, Alex Wright shows us that humans have been attempting to fix categories upon the world throughout history, and that organizing information is a fundamental part of what makes us human. Many books tell you how to organizing things ª this one tells you why we do it." ª Paul Ford, Associate Editor, Harper's Magazine "Information technology is part of what makes us human, and its story is our own. In this masterfully written book, Alex Wright traces the roots of the IT Revolution deep into human prehistory, showing how our lives are intimately bound up with the 'escalating fugue' of information technology." ª Louis Rosenfeld, coauthor of Information Architecture for the World Wide Web "We have no idea how to handle the upcoming explosion of information. I found Alex Wright's quick, clear history of past methods for managing oceans of information to be a handy clue to where we are going. He introduces you to an ecosystem of information organizations far more complex and interesting than the mere 'search' tool." ª Kevin Kelly, author of Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World "This is a

must-read for anybody who wants to understand where we've been and where we're going. A lucid, exciting book full of flashes of surprise about how we've done it all before: prehistoric beads as networking aids, third-century random access systems, seventh-century Irish monastic bloggers, eleventh-century multimedia, sixteenth-century hypertext. I wish I'd written it!"James Burke, author of *American Connections: The Founding Fathers Networked*

Alex Wright explains that in this volume, he approaches the story of the information age "by squarely looking backward" and along the way, he (and his reader) will "traverse a number of topics not usually brought together in one volume: evolutionary biology, cultural anthropology, mythology, monasticism, the history of printing, the scientific method, eighteenth-century taxonomies, Victorian librarianship, and the early history of the computer, to name a few." It is an especially exciting journey during which he explores separate but related subjects such as these:

- o Creation and subsequent development of language and information
- o Corresponding increase of information sources and documentation (e.g. papyrus, codex, printing press)
- o Corresponding increase of difficulty with managing information (i.e. accessing, processing, organizing, updating, and distributing it)
- o Emergence of communities that accelerate communication, cooperation, and collaboration
- o Process by which the human race has reached a "precipice" between "the near limitless capacity of computer networks and the real physical limits of human comprehension"

Wright challenges his reader to ask: Have the nature and extent of information (i.e. its scope, depth, and volume) exceeded our ability to process it, much less manage it? Here's a related question: If so, will the need for hierarchical control systems preclude man's "deepest rooted social instincts"? Wright asserts -- and I agree -- that those instincts are returning to the fore, "as people adapt new technologies to invoke the ancient emotional circuitry that carried us through the age before symbols. The future of memory may lie not in our heads but in our hearts." I prefer to think that what we have is not a glut of information but, rather, a glut of as-yet unrealized potentialities. By reading Alex Wright's book, we gain a much deeper understanding of where we have been and thus are better prepared for what has yet to be achieved.

Starting with the simple algorithmic rules behind the cathedral like architectural masterpieces of termites and progressing to the Science Citation Index and Google, Wright constructs a broad sweep of the history of information and information management allowing the reader to draw his or her own conclusions as to how we will manage the information overload of the nascent knowledge revolution. As insightful as it is profound, this book is a must read for anyone looking to understand

the history and future of information management.

This book might be good for people with a vague interest in the topic or for a coffee table book. I bought it thinking that it coming from Cornell would mean that it was academic scholarship. It is not. It has almost no citations, and flies across time giving only the most cursory examinations of the technologies it looks at. While this might be fine in some cases, it is particularly problematic because it presents summaries of objects that seem factually inaccurate and I cannot for the life of me figure out where he got the information so that I might verify it.

I have a lot of books in my 'to read' pile, but *Glut* went straight to the top. I knew it was going to be well researched and insightful, but I was surprised at how much fun I had reading it. I'm a big fan of arcane knowledge and quotable tidbits, and this book was full of both. Thanks to Alex for unearthing this knowledge that I now dispense liberally. Hard to think of a page-turner in the field of information management, but one exists, and Alex Wright wrote it. I'm not a big one for building a personal library. I usually read a book, then gift to a friend with the condition that they then pass it on. In this case, you may borrow my copy of *Glut*, but it needs to be returned to me. It's earned a spot on my bookshelf!

Wright's beautifully written book, *Glut* is the right book for you. Among other things, this book is a deeper exploration of the rich history of traditional information revolutions and how networks and hierarchies have co-existed for millennia mutually shaping each other. As Wright notes, the contributions of librarians from Callimachus (Library of Alexandria) in the 3rd Century BC to Cutter and Dewey in the 19th Century to Paul Otlet (the Mundaneum) and Eugene Garfield (precursor of bibliometrics and page ranking), in the 20th century A.D. to the present information organisation systems including the web has been phenomenon. The stories are fascinating. Central to Wright's discussion is the role of libraries and librarians who contributed greatly such as Paul Otlet, who as Wright persuasively argues, envisioned today's web in the 1930's, well before Vannevar Bush. Wright discusses in great detail how Otlet's contributions could be on par with that of Vannevar Bush and Ted Nelson, all forbearers to Tim Berners-Lee's web. Important in this regard is the part of the discussion in the book on how Otlet came to conclude that catalogues and indexes available at the time could only guide the reader "as far as the individual book" but not to the relationship of the contents in other books; then Otlet saw the possibility of creating semantic links between documents (the "réseau"). The book is an important read for information architects, librarians and anyone

interested about the web. Its main contention is that hierarchies (traditional information organisation systems such as taxonomies) vis-à-vis networks (traditional tribal folk-categorisation systems and today's folksonomies) are not in opposition. Instead, as Wright argues, they complement each other. I think it is an interesting balance between ontologies and web 2.0 approaches.

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