
THE INFORMATION

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A History

A Theory

A Flood

JAMES GLEICK



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Anyway, those tickets, the old ones, they didn't tell you where you were going, much less where you came from. He couldn't remember seeing any dates on them, either, and there was certainly no mention of time. It was all different now, of course. All this information. Archie wondered why that was.

—Zadie Smith

What we call the past is built on bits.

—John Archibald Wheeler

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PROLOGUE

The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. Frequently the messages have meaning.

—Claude Shannon (1948)

AFTER 1948, which was the crucial year, people thought they could see the clear purpose that inspired Claude Shannon's work, but that was hindsight. He saw it differently: *My mind wanders around, and I conceive of different things day and night. Like a science-fiction writer, I'm thinking, "What if it were like this?"*

As it happened, 1948 was when the Bell Telephone Laboratories announced the invention of a tiny electronic semiconductor, "an amazingly simple device" that could do anything a vacuum tube could do and more efficiently. It was a crystalline sliver, so small that a hundred would fit in the palm of your hand. In May, scientists formed a committee to come up with a name, and the committee passed out paper ballots to senior engineers in Murray Hill, New Jersey, listing some choices: *semiconductor*, *triod*, *triod* ... *iotatron* ... *transistor* (a hybrid of *varistor* and *transconductance*). *Transistor* won out. "It may have far-reaching significance in electronics and electrical communication," Bell Labs declared in a press release, and for once the reality surpassed the hype. The transistor sparked the revolution in electronics, setting the technology on its path of miniaturization and ubiquity, and soon won the Nobel Prize for its three chief inventors. For the laboratory it was the jewel in the crown. But it was only the second most significant development of that year. The transistor was only hardware.

An invention even more profound and more fundamental came in a monograph spread across seventy-nine pages of *The Bell System Technical Journal* in July and October. No one bothered with a press release. It carried a title both simple and grand—"A Mathematical Theory of Communication"—and the message was hard to summarize. But it was a fulcrum around which the world began to turn. Like the transistor, this development also involved a neologism: the word *bit* chosen in this case not by committee but by the lone author, a thirty-two-year-old named Claude Shannon. The bit now joined the inch, the pound, the quart, and the minute as a determinate quantity—a fundamental unit of measure.

But measuring what? "A unit for measuring information," Shannon wrote, as though there were such a thing, measurable and quantifiable, as information.

Shannon supposedly belonged to the Bell Labs mathematical research group, but he mostly kept to himself. When the group left the New York headquarters for shiny new space in the New Jersey suburbs, he stayed behind, haunting a cubbyhole in the old building, a twelve-story sandy brick hulk on West Street, its industrial back to the Hudson River, its front facing the edge of Greenwich Village. He disliked commuting, and he liked the downtown neighborhood, where he could hear jazz

clarinetists in late-night clubs. He was flirting shyly with a young woman who worked in Bell Lab's microwave research group in the two-story former Nabisco factory across the street. People considered him a smart young man. Fresh from MIT he had plunged into the laboratory's war work, first developing an automatic fire-control director for anti-aircraft guns, then focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of secret communication—cryptography—and working out a mathematical proof of the security of the so-called X System, the telephone hotline between Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt. So now his managers were willing to leave him alone, even though they did not understand exactly what he was working on.

AT&T at midcentury did not demand instant gratification from its research division. It allowed detours into mathematics or astrophysics with no apparent commercial purpose. Anyway so much of modern science bore directly or indirectly on the company's mission, which was vast, monopolistic and almost all-encompassing. Still, broad as it was, the telephone company's core subject matter remained just out of focus. By 1948 more than 125 million conversations passed daily through the Bell System's 138 million miles of cable and 31 million telephone sets. The Bureau of the Census reported these facts under the rubric of "Communications in the United States," but they were crude measures of communication. The census also counted several thousand broadcasting stations for radio and a few dozen for television, along with newspapers, books, pamphlets, and the mail. The post office counted its letters and parcels, but what, exactly, did the Bell System carry, counted in what units? Not *conversations*, surely; nor *words*, nor certainly *characters*. Perhaps it was just electricity. The company's engineers were electrical engineers. Everyone understood that electricity served as a surrogate for sound, the sound of the human voice, waves in the air entering the telephone mouthpiece and converted into electrical waveforms. This conversion was the essence of the telephone's advance over the telegraph—the predecessor technology, already seeming so quaint. Telegraphy relied on a different sort of conversion: a code of dots and dashes, not based on sounds at all but on the written alphabet, which was, after all, a code in its turn. Indeed, considering the matter closely, one could see a chain of abstraction and conversion: the dots and dashes representing letters of the alphabet; the letters representing sounds, and in combination forming words; the words representing some ultimate substrate of meaning, perhaps best left to philosophers.

The Bell System had none of those, but the company had hired its first mathematician in 1897. George Campbell, a Minnesotan who had studied in Göttingen and Vienna. He immediately confronted a crippling problem of early telephone transmission. Signals were distorted as they passed across the circuits; the greater the distance, the worse the distortion. Campbell's solution was partly mathematics and partly electrical engineering. His employers learned not to worry much about the distinction. Shannon himself, as a student, had never been quite able to decide whether to become an engineer or a mathematician. For Bell Labs he was both, willy-nilly, practical about circuits and relay but happiest in a realm of symbolic abstraction. Most communications engineers focused their expertise on physical problems, amplification and modulation, phase distortion and signal-to-noise degradation. Shannon liked games and puzzles. Secret codes entranced him, beginning when he was a boy reading Edgar Allan Poe. He gathered threads like a magpie. As a first-year research assistant at MIT, he worked on a hundred-ton proto-computer, Vannevar Bush's Differential Analyzer, which could solve equations with great rotating gears, shafts, and wheels. At twenty-two he wrote a dissertation that applied a nineteenth-century idea, George Boole's algebra of logic, to the design of electrical circuits. (Logic and electricity—a peculiar combination.) Later he worked with the mathematician and logician Hermann Weyl, who taught him what a theory was: "Theories perm

consciousness to ‘jump over its own shadow,’ to leave behind the given, to represent the transcendent yet, as is self-evident, only in symbols.”

In 1943 the English mathematician and code breaker Alan Turing visited Bell Labs on a cryptographic mission and met Shannon sometimes over lunch, where they traded speculation on the future of artificial thinking machines. (“Shannon wants to feed not just *data* to a Brain, but cultural things!” Turing exclaimed. “He wants to play music to it!”) Shannon also crossed paths with Norbert Wiener, who had taught him at MIT and by 1948 was proposing a new discipline to be called “cybernetics,” the study of communication and control. Meanwhile Shannon began paying special attention to television signals, from a peculiar point of view: wondering whether their content could be somehow compacted or compressed to allow for faster transmission. Logic and circuits crossed to make a new, hybrid thing; so did codes and genes. In his solitary way, seeking a framework to connect his many threads, Shannon began assembling a theory for information.

The raw material lay all around, glistening and buzzing in the landscape of the early twentieth century: letters and messages, sounds and images, news and instructions, figures and facts, signals and signs: a hodgepodge of related species. They were on the move, by post or wire or electromagnetic wave. But no one word denoted all that stuff. “Off and on,” Shannon wrote to Vannevar Bush at MIT in 1939, “I have been working on an analysis of some of the fundamental properties of general systems for the transmission of intelligence.” *Intelligence*: that was a flexible term, very old. “Nowe used for a elegant worde,” Sir Thomas Elyot wrote in the sixteenth century, “where there is mutuall treaties and appoyntementes, eyther by letters or message.” It had taken on other meanings, though. A few engineers, especially in the telephone labs, began speaking of *information*. They used the word in a way suggesting something technical: quantity of information, or measure of information. Shannon adopted this usage.

For the purposes of science, *information* had to mean something special. Three centuries earlier, the new discipline of physics could not proceed until Isaac Newton appropriated words that were ancient and vague—*force*, *mass*, *motion*, and even *time*—and gave them new meanings. Newton made the terms into quantities, suitable for use in mathematical formulas. Until then, *motion* (for example) had been just as soft and inclusive a term as *information*. For Aristotelians, motion covered a far-flung family of phenomena: a peach ripening, a stone falling, a child growing, a body decaying. That was too rich. Most varieties of motion had to be tossed out before Newton’s laws could apply and the Scientific Revolution could succeed. In the nineteenth century, *energy* began to undergo a similar transformation: natural philosophers adapted a word meaning vigor or intensity. They mathematicized it, giving energy its fundamental place in the physicists’ view of nature.

It was the same with information. A rite of purification became necessary.

And then, when it was made simple, distilled, counted in bits, information was found to be everywhere. Shannon’s theory made a bridge between information and uncertainty; between information and entropy; and between information and chaos. It led to compact discs and fax machines, computers and cyberspace, Moore’s law and all the world’s Silicon Alleys. Information processing was born, along with information storage and information retrieval. People began to name a successor to the Iron Age and the Steam Age. “Man the food-gatherer reappears incongruously as an information-gatherer,” remarked Marshall McLuhan in 1967.* He wrote this an instant too soon, in the first dawn of computation and cyberspace.

We can see now that information is what our world runs on: the blood and the fuel, the vit principle. It pervades the sciences from top to bottom, transforming every branch of knowledge. Information theory began as a bridge from mathematics to electrical engineering and from there to computing. What English speakers call “computer science” Europeans have known as *informatique*, *informatica*, and *Informatik*. Now even biology has become an information science, a subject of messages, instructions, and code. Genes encapsulate information and enable procedures for reading it in and writing it out. Life spreads by networking. The body itself is an information processor. Memory resides not just in brains but in every cell. No wonder genetics bloomed along with information theory. DNA is the quintessential information molecule, the most advanced message processor at the cellular level—an alphabet and a code, 6 billion bits to form a human being. “What lies at the heart of every living thing is not a fire, not warm breath, not a ‘spark of life,’ ” declares the evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins. “It is information, words, instructions... If you want to understand life, don’t think about vibrant, throbbing gels and oozes, think about information technology.” The cells of an organism are nodes in a richly interwoven communications network, transmitting and receiving, coding and decoding. Evolution itself embodies an ongoing exchange of information between organism and environment.

“The information circle becomes the unit of life,” says Werner Loewenstein after thirty years spent studying intercellular communication. He reminds us that *information* means something deeper now. “It connotes a cosmic principle of organization and order, and it provides an exact measure of that order. The gene has its cultural analog, too: the meme. In cultural evolution, a meme is a replicator and propagator—an idea, a fashion, a chain letter, or a conspiracy theory. On a bad day, a meme is a virus.

Economics is recognizing itself as an information science, now that money itself is completing its developmental arc from matter to bits, stored in computer memory and magnetic strips, world finance coursing through the global nervous system. Even when money seemed to be material treasure, heavy in pockets and ships’ holds and bank vaults, it always was information. Coins and notes, shekels and cowries were all just short-lived technologies for tokenizing information about who owns what.

And atoms? Matter has its own coinage, and the hardest science of all, physics, seemed to have reached maturity. But physics, too, finds itself sideswiped by a new intellectual model. In the years after World War II, the heyday of the physicists, the great news of science appeared to be the splitting of the atom and the control of nuclear energy. Theorists focused their prestige and resources on the search for fundamental particles and the laws governing their interaction, the construction of giant accelerators and the discovery of quarks and gluons. From this exalted enterprise, the business of communications research could not have appeared further removed. At Bell Labs, Claude Shannon was not thinking about physics. Particle physicists did not need bits.

And then, all at once, they did. Increasingly, the physicists and the information theorists are one and the same. The bit is a fundamental particle of a different sort: not just tiny but abstract—a binary digit, a flip-flop, a yes-or-no. It is insubstantial, yet as scientists finally come to understand information, they wonder whether it may be primary: more fundamental than matter itself. They suggest that the bit is the irreducible kernel and that information forms the very core of existence. Bridging the physics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, John Archibald Wheeler, the last surviving collaborator of both Einstein and Bohr, put this manifesto in oracular monosyllables: “from Bit.” Information gives rise to “every it—every particle, every field of force, even the spacetime continuum itself.” This is another way of fathoming the paradox of the observer: that the outcome of an experiment is affected, or even determined, when it is observed. Not only is the observer observing

she is asking questions and making statements that must ultimately be expressed in discrete bits. “What we call reality,” Wheeler wrote coyly, “arises in the last analysis from the posing of yes-no questions.” He added: “All things physical are information-theoretic in origin, and this is a participatory universe.” The whole universe is thus seen as a computer—a cosmic information processing machine.

A key to the enigma is a type of relationship that had no place in classical physics: the phenomenon known as entanglement. When particles or quantum systems are entangled, their properties remain correlated across vast distances and vast times. Light-years apart, they share something that is not only physical, yet not only physical. Spooky paradoxes arise, unresolvable until one understands how entanglement encodes information, measured in bits or their drolly named quantum counterparts, qubits. When photons and electrons and other particles interact, what are they really doing? Exchanging bits, transmitting quantum states, processing information. The laws of physics are the algorithms. Every burning star, every silent nebula, every particle leaving its ghostly trace in a cloud chamber is an information processor. The universe computes its own destiny.

How much does it compute? How fast? How big is its total information capacity, its memory space? What is the link between energy and information; what is the energy cost of flipping a bit? These are hard questions, but they are not as mystical or metaphorical as they sound. Physicists and quantum information theorists, a new breed, struggle with them together. They do the math and produce tentative answers. (“The bit count of the cosmos, however it is figured, is ten raised to a very large power,” according to Wheeler. According to Seth Lloyd: “No more than 10^{120} ops on 10^{90} bits.”) They look anew at the mysteries of thermodynamic entropy and at those notorious information swallower, black holes. “Tomorrow,” Wheeler declares, “we will have learned to understand and express *all* physics in the language of information.”

As the role of information grows beyond anyone’s reckoning, it grows to be too much. “TMI,” people now say. We have information fatigue, anxiety, and glut. We have met the Devil of Information Overload and his impish underlings, the computer virus, the busy signal, the dead link, and the PowerPoint presentation. All this, too, is due in its roundabout way to Shannon. Everything changed so quickly. John Robinson Pierce (the Bell Labs engineer who had come up with the word *transistor*) mused afterward: “It is hard to picture the world before Shannon as it seemed to those who lived in it. It is difficult to recover innocence, ignorance, and lack of understanding.”

Yet the past does come back into focus. *In the beginning was the word*, according to John. We are the species that named itself *Homo sapiens*, the one who knows—and then, after reflection, amended that to *Homo sapiens sapiens*. The greatest gift of Prometheus to humanity was not fire after all. “Numbers, too, chiefest of sciences, I invented for them, and the combining of letters, creative mother of the Muses’ arts, with which to hold all things in memory.” 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. Our culture has absorbed a working vocabulary for these useful inventions. We speak of compressing data, aware that this is quite different from compressing a gas. We know about streaming information, parsing it, sorting it, matching it, and filtering it. Our furniture includes iPods and plasma displays, our skills include texting and Googling, we are endowed, we are expert, so we see information in the foreground. But it has always been there. It pervaded our ancestors’ world, too, taking forms from solid to ethereal, granite gravestones and the whispers of courtiers. The punched card, the cash register, the

nineteenth-century Difference Engine, the wires of telegraphy all played their parts in weaving the spiderweb of information to which we cling. Each new information technology, in its own time, set of blooms in storage and transmission. From the printing press came new species of information organizers: dictionaries, cyclopaedias, almanacs—compendiums of words, classifiers of facts, trees of knowledge. Hardly any information technology goes obsolete. Each new one throws its predecessor into relief. Thus Thomas Hobbes, in the seventeenth century, resisted his era's new-media hype: "The invention of printing, though ingenious, compared with the invention of letters is no great matter." Up to a point, he was right. Every new medium transforms the nature of human thought. In the long run, history is the story of information becoming aware of itself.

Some information technologies were appreciated in their own time, but others were not. One that was sorely misunderstood was the African talking drum.

* And added drily: "In this role, electronic man is no less a nomad than his Paleolithic ancestors."

1 | DRUMS THAT TALK

(When a Code Is Not a Code)

Across the Dark Continent sound the never-silent drums: the base of all the music, the focus of every dance; the talking drums, the wireless of the unmapped jungle.

—Irma Wassall (1943)

NO ONE SPOKE SIMPLY ON THE DRUMS. Drummers would not say, “Come back home,” but rather,

Make your feet come back the way they went,
make your legs come back the way they went,
plant your feet and your legs below,
in the village which belongs to us.

They could not just say “corpse” but would elaborate: “which lies on its back on clods of earth. Instead of “don’t be afraid,” they would say, “Bring your heart back down out of your mouth, your heart out of your mouth, get it back down from there.” The drums generated fountains of oratory. They seemed inefficient. Was it grandiloquence or bombast? Or something else?

For a long time Europeans in sub-Saharan Africa had no idea. In fact they had no idea that the drums conveyed information at all. In their own cultures, in special cases a drum could be an instrument of signaling, along with the bugle and the bell, used to transmit a small set of messages: *attack; retreat; come to church*. But they could not conceive of talking drums. In 1730 Francis Moore sailed eastward up the Gambia River, finding it navigable for six hundred miles, all the way admiring the beauty of the country and such curious wonders as “oysters that grew upon trees” (mangroves). He was not much of a naturalist. He was reconnoitering as an agent for English slavers in kingdoms inhabited, as he saw it, by different races of people of black or tawny colors, “as Mundingoes, Jolloiffs, Pholeys, Floops, and Portuguese.” When he came upon men and women carrying drums carved of wood as much as a yard long, tapered from top to bottom, he noted that women danced briskly to their music, and sometimes that the drums were “beat on the approach of an enemy,” and finally “on some very extraordinary occasions,” that the drums summoned help from neighboring towns. But that was all he noticed.

A century later, Captain William Allen, on an expedition to the Niger River, * made a further discovery, by virtue of paying attention to his Cameroon pilot, whom he called Glasgow. They were in the cabin of the iron paddle ship when, as Allen recalled:

Suddenly he became totally abstracted, and remained for a while in the attitude of listening. On being taxed with

inattention, he said, “You no hear my son speak?” As we had heard no voice, he was asked how he knew it. He said, “Drum speak me, tell me come up deck.” This seemed to be very singular.

The captain’s skepticism gave way to amazement, as Glasgow convinced him that every village had this “facility of musical correspondence.” Hard though it was to believe, the captain finally accepted that detailed messages of many sentences could be conveyed across miles. “We are often surprised,” he wrote, “to find the sound of the trumpet so well understood in our military evolutions; but how few short that falls of the result arrived at by those untutored savages.” That result was a technology much sought in Europe: long-distance communication faster than any traveler on foot or horseback. Through the still night air over a river, the thump of the drum could carry six or seven miles. Relayed from village to village, messages could rumble a hundred miles or more in a matter of an hour.

A birth announcement in Bolenge, a village of the Belgian Congo, went like this:

Batoko fala fala, tokema bolo bolo, boseka woliana imaki tonkilingonda, ale nda bobila wa fole fole, asokoka l’isika koke koke.

The mats are rolled up, we feel strong, a woman came from the forest, she is in the open village, that is enough for this time.

A missionary, Roger T. Clarke, transcribed this call to a fisherman’s funeral:

La nkesa laa mpombolo, tofolange benteke biesala, tolanga benteke bolokolo bole nda elinga l’enjale baenga, basaki l’okala bopele pele. Bojende bosalaki lifeta Bolenge wa kala kala, tekendake tonkilingonda, tekendake beningo la nkaka elinga l’enjale. Tolanga benteke bolokolo bole nda elinga l’enjale, la nkesa la mpombolo.

In the morning at dawn, we do not want gatherings for work, we want a meeting of play on the river. Men who live in Bolenge, do not go to the forest, do not go fishing. We want a meeting of play on the river, in the morning at dawn.

Clarke noted several facts. While only some people learned to communicate by drum, almost anyone could understand the messages in the drumbeats. Some people drummed rapidly and some slowly. Some phrases would recur again and again, virtually unchanged, yet different drummers would send the same message with different wording. Clarke decided that the drum language was at once formulaic and fluid. “The signals represent the tones of the syllables of conventional phrases of a traditional and highly poetic character,” he concluded, and this was correct, but he could not take the last step toward understanding why.

These Europeans spoke of “the native mind” and described Africans as “primitive” and “animistic” and nonetheless came to see that they had achieved an ancient dream of every human culture. Here was a messaging system that outpaced the best couriers, the fastest horses on good roads with way stations and relays. Earth-bound, foot-based messaging systems always disappointed. Their armies outran them. Julius Caesar, for example, was “very often arriving before the messengers sent to announce his coming,” as Suetonius reported in the first century. The ancients were not without resources, however. The Greeks used fire beacons at the time of the Trojan War, in the twelfth century BCE, by all accounts—that is, those of Homer, Virgil, and Aeschylus. A bonfire on a mountaintop could be seen from watchtowers twenty miles distant, or in special cases even farther. In the Aeschylus version, Clytemnestra gets the news of the fall of Troy that very night, four hundred miles away in Mycenae. “Yet who so swift could speed the message here?” the skeptical Chorus asks.

She credits Hephaestus, god of fire: “Sent forth his sign; and on, and ever on, beacon to beacon sped the courier-flame.” This is no small accomplishment, and the listener needs convincing, so Aeschylus has Clytemnestra continue for several minutes with every detail of the route: the blazing signal roared from Mount Ida, carried across the northern Aegean Sea to the island of Lemnos; from there to Mount Athos in Macedonia; then southward across plains and lakes to Macistus; Messapius, where the watcher “saw the far flame gleam on Euripus’ tide, and from the high-piled heap of withered furze lit the new sign and bade the message on”; Cithaeron; Aegiplanetus; and her own town’s mountain watchtower Arachne. “So sped from stage to stage, fulfilled in turn, flame after flame,” she boasts, “along the course ordained.” A German historian, Richard Hennig, traced and measured the route in 1908 and confirmed the feasibility of this chain of bonfires. The meaning of the message had, of course, to be prearranged, effectively condensed into a single bit. A binary choice, *something* or *nothing*: the fire signal meant *something*, which, just this once, meant “Troy has fallen.” To transmit this one bit required immense planning, labor, watchfulness, and firewood. Many years later, lanterns in Old North Church likewise sent Paul Revere a single precious bit, which he carried onward, one binary choice: by land or by sea.

More capacity was required, for less extraordinary occasions. People tried flags, horns, intermittent smoke, and flashing mirrors. They conjured spirits and angels for purposes of communication—angels being divine messengers, by definition. The discovery of magnetism held particular promise. In a world already suffused with magic, magnets embodied occult powers. The lodestone attracts iron. The power of attraction extends invisibly through the air. Nor is it interrupted by water or even solid bodies. A lodestone held on one side of a wall can move a piece of iron on the other side. More intriguing, the magnetic power appears able to coordinate objects vast distances apart, across the whole earth: namely, compass needles. What if one needle could control another? This idea spread—“conceit,” Thomas Browne wrote in the 1640s,

whispered thorow the world with some attention, credulous and vulgar auditors readily believing it, and more judicious and distinctive heads, not altogether rejecting it. The conceit is excellent, and if the effect would follow, somewhat divine; whereby we might communicate like spirits, and confer on earth with Menippus in the Moon.

The idea of “sympathetic” needles appeared wherever there were natural philosophers and confident artists. In Italy a man tried to sell Galileo “a secret method of communicating with a person two or three thousand miles away, by means of a certain sympathy of magnetic needles.”

I told him that I would gladly buy, but wanted to see by experiment and that it would be enough for me if he would stand in one room and I in another. He replied that its operation could not be detected at such a short distance. I sent him on his way, with the remark that I was not in the mood at that time to go to Cairo or Moscow for the experiment, but that if he wanted to go I would stay in Venice and take care of the other end.

The idea was that if a pair of needles were magnetized together—“touched with the same Loadstone as Browne put it—they would remain in sympathy from then on, even when separated by distance. One might call this “entanglement.” A sender and a recipient would take the needles and agree on a time to communicate. They would place their needle in disks with the letters of the alphabet spaced around the rim. The sender would spell out a message by turning the needle. “For then, said the tradition,” Browne explained, “at what distance of place soever, when one needle shall be removed unto any letter, the other by a wonderfull sympathy will move unto the same.” Unlike most people who considered the idea of sympathetic needles, however, Browne actually tried the experiment. It d

not work. When he turned one needle, the other stood still.

Browne did not go so far as to rule out the possibility that this mysterious force could someday be used for communication, but he added one more caveat. Even if magnetic communication at a distance was possible, he suggested, a problem might arise when sender and receiver tried to synchronize their actions. How would they know the time,

it being no ordinary or Almanack business, but a probleme Mathematical, to finde out the difference of hours in different places; nor do the wisest exactly satisfy themselves in all. For the hours of several places anticipate each other, according to their Longitudes; which are not exactly discovered of every place.

This was a prescient thought, and entirely theoretical, a product of new seventeenth-century knowledge of astronomy and geography. It was the first crack in the hitherto solid assumption of simultaneity. Anyway, as Browne noted, experts differed. Two more centuries would pass before anyone could actually travel fast enough, or communicate fast enough, to experience local time differences. For now, in fact, no one in the world could communicate as much, as fast, as far as unlettered Africans with their drums.

By the time Captain Allen discovered the talking drums in 1841, Samuel F. B. Morse was struggling with his own percussive code, the electromagnetic drumbeat designed to pulse along the telegraph wire. Inventing a code was a complex and delicate problem. He did not even think in terms of a code at first, but “a system of signs for letters, to be indicated and marked by a quick succession of strokes or shocks of the galvanic current.” The annals of invention offered scarcely any precedent. How to convert information from one form, the everyday language, into another form suitable for transmission by wire taxed his ingenuity more than any mechanical problem of the telegraph. It was fitting that history attached Morse’s name to his code, more than to his device.

He had at hand a technology that seemed to allow only crude pulses, bursts of current on and off, an electrical circuit closing and opening. How could he convey language through the clicking of an electromagnet? His first idea was to send numbers, a digit at a time, with dots and pauses. The sequence ••• •• ••••• would mean 325. Every English word would be assigned a number, and the telegraphists at each end of the line would look them up in a special dictionary. Morse set about creating this dictionary himself, wasting many hours inscribing it on large folios.* He claimed the idea in his first telegraph patent, in 1840:

The dictionary or vocabulary consists of words alphabetically arranged and regularly numbered, beginning with the letters of the alphabet, so that each word in the language has its telegraphic number, and is designated at pleasure, through the signs of numerals.

Seeking efficiency, he weighed the costs and possibilities across several intersecting planes. There was the cost of transmission itself: the wires would be expensive and would convey only so many pulses per minute. Numbers would be relatively easy to transmit. But then there was the extra cost of time and difficulty for the telegraphists. The idea of code books—lookup tables—still had possibilities, and it echoed into the future, arising again in other technologies. Eventually it worked for Chinese telegraphy. But Morse realized that it would be hopelessly cumbersome for operators to page through a dictionary for every word.

His protégé Alfred Vail, meanwhile, was developing a simple lever key by which an operator could

rapidly close and open the electric circuit. Vail and Morse turned to the idea of a coded alphabet using signs as surrogates for the letters and thus spelling out every word. Somehow the bare signs would have to stand in for all the words of the spoken or written language. They had to map the entire language onto a single dimension of pulses. At first they conceived of a system built on two elements: the clicks (now called dots) and the spaces in between. Then, as they fiddled with the prototype keypad, they came up with a third sign: the line or dash, “when the circuit was closed a longer time than was necessary to make a dot.” (The code became known as the dot-and-dash alphabet, but the unmentioned space remained just as important; Morse code was not a binary language.*) That humans could learn this new language was, at first, wondrous. They would have to master the coding system and then perform a continuous act of double translation: language to signs; mind to fingers. One witness was amazed at how the telegraphists internalized these skills:

The clerks who attend at the recording instrument become so expert in their curious hieroglyphics, that they do not need to look at the printed record to know what the message under reception is; the recording instrument has for them an intelligible articulate language. They understand *its speech*. They can close their eyes and listen to the strange clicking that is going on close to their ear whilst the printing is in progress, and at once say what it all means.

In the name of speed, Morse and Vail had realized that they could save strokes by reserving the shorter sequences of dots and dashes for the most common letters. But which letters would be used most often? Little was known about the alphabet’s statistics. In search of data on the letters’ relative frequencies, Vail was inspired to visit the local newspaper office in Morristown, New Jersey, and look over the type cases. He found a stock of twelve thousand E’s, nine thousand T’s, and only two hundred Z’s. He and Morse rearranged the alphabet accordingly. They had originally used dash-dash-dot to represent T, the second most common letter; now they promoted T to a single dash, thus saving telegraph operators uncountable billions of key taps in the world to come. Long afterward, information theorists calculated that they had come within 15 percent of an optimal arrangement for telegraphing English text.

No such science, no such pragmatism informed the language of the drums. Yet there had been a problem to solve, just as there was in the design of a code for telegraphers: how to map an entire language onto a one-dimensional stream of the barest sounds. This design problem was solved collectively by generations of drummers in a centuries-long process of social evolution. By the early twentieth century the analogy to the telegraph was apparent to Europeans studying Africa. “Only a few days ago I read in the *Times*,” Captain Robert Sutherland Rattray reported to the Royal African Society in London, “how a resident in one part of Africa heard of the death—in another and far removed part of the continent—of a European baby, and how this news was carried by means of drums, which were used, it was stated, ‘on the Morse principle’—it is always ‘the Morse principle.’”

But the obvious analogy led people astray. They failed to decipher the code of the drums because, in effect, there was no code. Morse had bootstrapped his system from a middle symbolic layer, the written alphabet, intermediate between speech and his final code. His dots and dashes had no direct connection to sound; they represented letters, which formed written words, which represented the spoken words in turn. The drummers could not build on an intermediate code—they could not abstract through a layer of symbols—because the African languages, like all but a few dozen of the several thousand languages spoken in the modern world, lacked an alphabet. The drums metamorphosed

speech.

It fell to John F. Carrington to explain. An English missionary, born in 1914 in Northamptonshire, Carrington left for Africa at the age of twenty-four and Africa became his lifetime home. The drum caught his attention early, as he traveled from the Baptist Missionary Society station in Yakusu, on the Upper Congo River, through the villages of the Bambole forest. One day he made an impromptu trip to the small town of Yaongama and was surprised to find a teacher, medical assistant, and church members already assembled for his arrival. They had heard the drums, they explained. Eventually Carrington realized that the drums conveyed not just announcements and warnings but prayers, poetry, and even jokes. The drummers were not signaling but talking: they spoke a special, adapted language.

Eventually Carrington himself learned to drum. He drummed mainly in Kele, a language of the Bantu family in what is now eastern Zaire. “He is not really a European, despite the color of his skin,” a Lokele villager said of Carrington. “He used to be from our village, one of us. After he died, the spirits made a mistake and sent him off far away to a village of whites to enter into the body of a little baby who was born of a white woman instead of one of ours. But because he belongs to us, he could not forget where he came from and so he came back.” The villager added generously, “If he is a bit awkward on the drums, this is because of the poor education that the whites gave him.” Carrington’s life in Africa spanned four decades. He became an accomplished botanist, anthropologist, and above all linguist, authoritative on the structure of African language families: thousands of dialects and several hundred distinct languages. He noticed how loquacious a good drummer had to be. He finally published his discoveries about drums in 1949, in a slim volume titled *The Talking Drums of Africa*.

In solving the enigma of the drums, Carrington found the key in a central fact about the relevant African languages. They are tonal languages, in which meaning is determined as much by rising and falling pitch contours as by distinctions between consonants or vowels. This feature is missing from most Indo-European languages, including English, which uses tone only in limited, syntactical ways—for example, to distinguish questions (“you are happy ↗”) from declarations (“you are happy ↘”). But for other languages, including, most famously, Mandarin and Cantonese, tone has primary significance in distinguishing words. So it does in most African languages. Even when Europeans learned to communicate in these languages, they generally failed to grasp the importance of tonality because they had no experience with it. When they transliterated the words they heard into the Latin alphabet, they disregarded pitch altogether. In effect, they were color-blind.

Three different Kele words are transliterated by Europeans as *lisaka*. The words are distinguished only by their speech-tones. Thus *lisaka* with three low syllables is a puddle; *lisaka*, the last syllable rising (not necessarily stressed) is a promise; and *li^asaka* is a poison. *Li^ala* means fiancée and *li^a* rubbish pit. In transliteration they appear to be homonyms, but they are not. Carrington, after the light dawned, recalled, “I must have been guilty many a time of asking a boy to ‘paddle for a book’ or ‘fish that his friend is coming.’” Europeans just lacked the ear for the distinctions. Carrington saw how comical the confusion could become:

alambaka boili [- _ - - _ - _] = he watched the riverbank

alambaka boili [- - - - _ - _] = he boiled his mother-in-law

Since the late nineteenth century, linguists have identified the phoneme as the smallest acoustic unit that makes a difference in meaning. The English word *chuck* comprises three phonemes: different meanings can be created by changing *ch* to *d*, or *u* to *e*, or *ck* to *m*. It is a useful concept but a

imperfect one: linguists have found it surprisingly difficult to agree on an exact inventory of phonemes for English or any other language (most estimates for English are in the vicinity of forty-five). The problem is that a stream of speech is a continuum; a linguist may abstractly, and arbitrarily, break it into discrete units, but the meaningfulness of these units varies from speaker to speaker and depends on the context. Most speakers' instincts about phonemes are biased, too, by their knowledge of the written alphabet, which codifies language in its own sometimes arbitrary ways. In any case, tonal languages, with their extra variable, contain many more phonemes than were first apparent to inexperienced linguists.

As the spoken languages of Africa elevated tonality to a crucial role, the drum language went a difficult step further. It employed tone and only tone. It was a language of a single pair of phonemes, a language composed entirely of pitch contours. The drums varied in materials and craft. Some were sago gongs, tubes of padauk wood, hollow, cut with a long and narrow mouth to make a high-sounding lip and a low-sounding lip; others had skin tops, and these were used in pairs. All that mattered was for the drums to sound two distinct notes, at an interval of about a major third.

So in mapping the spoken language to the drum language, information was lost. The drum talk was speech with a deficit. For every village and every tribe, the drum language began with the spoken word and shed the consonants and vowels. That was a lot to lose. The remaining information stream would be riddled with ambiguity. A double stroke on the high-tone lip of the drum [– –] matched the tonal pattern of the Kele word for father, *sango*, but naturally it could just as well be *songe*, the moon; *koko*, fowl; *fele*, a species of fish; or any other word of two high tones. Even the limited dictionary the missionaries at Yakusu contained 130 such words. Having reduced spoken words, in all their sonorous richness, to such a minimal code, how could the drums distinguish them? The answer lay partly in stress and timing, but these could not compensate for the lack of consonants and vowels. Thus Carrington discovered, a drummer would invariably add “a little phrase” to each short word. *Songe*, the moon, is rendered as *songe li tange la manga*—“the moon looks down at the earth.” *Koko*, the fowl, is rendered *koko olongo la bokiokio*—“the fowl, the little one that says kiokio.” The extra drumbeats, far from being extraneous, provide context. Every ambiguous word begins in a cloud of possible alternative interpretations; then the unwanted possibilities evaporate. This takes place below the level of consciousness. Listeners are hearing only staccato drum tones, low and high, but in effect they “hear” the missing consonants and vowels, too. For that matter, they hear whole phrases, not individual words. “Among peoples who know nothing of writing or grammar, a word *per se*, cut out of its sound group, seems almost to cease to be an intelligible articulation,” Captain Rattray reported.

The stereotyped long tails flap along, their redundancy overcoming ambiguity. The drum language is creative, freely generating neologisms for innovations from the north: steamboats, cigarettes, and the Christian god being three that Carrington particularly noted. But drummers begin by learning the traditional fixed formulas. Indeed, the formulas of the African drummers sometimes preserve archaic words that have been forgotten in the everyday language. For the Yaunde, the elephant is always “the great awkward one.” The resemblance to Homeric formulas—not merely Zeus, but Zeus the cloud-gatherer; not just the sea, but the wine-dark sea—is no accident. In an oral culture, inspiration has to serve clarity and memory first. The Muses are the daughters of Mnemosyne.

Neither Kele nor English yet had words to say, *allocate extra bits for disambiguation and error correction*. Yet this is what the drum language did. Redundancy—inefficient by definition—serves as the antidote to confusion. It provides second chances. Every natural language has redundancy built in.

this is why people can understand text riddled with errors and why they can understand conversation in a noisy room. The natural redundancy of English motivates the famous New York City subway poster of the 1970s (and the poem by James Merrill),

if u cn rd ths

u cn gt a gd jb w hi pa!

(“This counterspell may save your soul,” Merrill adds.) Most of the time, redundancy in language is just part of the background. For a telegraphist it is an expensive waste. For an African drummer it is essential. Another specialized language provides a perfect analog: the language of aviation radio. Numbers and letters make up much of the information passed between pilots and air traffic controllers: altitudes, vectors, aircraft tail numbers, runway and taxiway identifiers, radio frequencies. This is critical communication over a notoriously noisy channel, so a specialized alphabet is employed to minimize ambiguity. The spoken letters *B* and *V* are easy to confuse; *bravo* and *victor* are safer. *B* and *N* become *mike* and *november*. In the case of numbers, *five* and *nine*, particularly prone to confusion, are spoken as *fife* and *niner*. The extra syllables perform the same function as the extra verbosity of the talking drums.

After publishing his book, John Carrington came across a mathematical way to understand the point. A paper by a Bell Labs telephone engineer, Ralph Hartley, even had a relevant-looking formula: $H = n \log s$, where H is the amount of information, n is the number of symbols in the message, and s is the number of symbols available in the language. Hartley’s younger colleague Claude Shannon later pursued this lead, and one of his touchstone projects became a precise measurement of the redundancy in English. Symbols could be words, phonemes, or dots and dashes. The degree of choice within a symbol set varied—a thousand words or forty-five phonemes or twenty-six letters or three types of interruption in an electrical circuit. The formula quantified a simple enough phenomenon (simple anyway, once it was noticed): the fewer symbols available, the more of them must be transmitted to get across a given amount of information. For the African drummers, messages need to be about eight times as long as their spoken equivalents.

Hartley took some pains to justify his use of the word *information*. “As commonly used, information is a very elastic term,” he wrote, “and it will first be necessary to set up for it a more specific meaning.” He proposed to think of information “physically”—his word—rather than psychologically. He found the complications multiplying. Somewhat paradoxically, the complexities arose from the intermediate layers of symbols: letters of the alphabet, or dots and dashes, which were discrete and therefore easily countable in themselves. Harder to measure were the connections between these stand-ins and the bottom layer: the human voice itself. It was this stream of meaningful sound that still seemed, to a telephone engineer as much as an African drummer, the real stuff of communication, even if the sound, in turn, served as a code for the knowledge or meaning below. In any case Hartley thought an engineer should be able to generalize over all cases of communication: writing and telegraph codes as well as the physical transmission of sound by means of electromagnetic waves along telephone wires or through the ether.

He knew nothing of the drums, of course. And no sooner did John Carrington come to understand them than they began to fade from the African scene. He saw Lokele youth practicing the drums less and less, schoolboys who did not even learn their own drum names. He regretted it. He had made the talking drums a part of his own life. In 1954 a visitor from the United States found him running

mission school in the Congolese outpost of Yalembo. Carrington still walked daily in the jungle, and when it was time for lunch his wife would summon him with a fast tattoo. She drummed: “White man spirit in forest come come to house of shingles high up above of white man spirit in forest. Woman with yams awaits. Come come.”

Before long, there were people for whom the path of communications technology had leapt directly from the talking drum to the mobile phone, skipping over the intermediate stages.

* The trip was sponsored by the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilization of Africa for the purpose of interfering with slavers.

* “A very short experience, however, showed the superiority of the alphabetic mode,” he wrote later, “and the big leaves of the numbered dictionary, which cost me a world of labor, . . . were discarded and the alphabetic installed in its stead.”

* Operators soon distinguished spaces of different lengths—intercharacter and interword—so Morse code actually employed four signs.

2 | THE PERSISTENCE OF THE WORD

(There Is No Dictionary in the Mind)

Odysseus wept when he heard the poet sing of his great deeds abroad because, once sung, they were no longer his alone. They belonged to anyone who heard the song.

—Ward Just (2004)

“TRY TO IMAGINE,” proposed Walter J. Ong, Jesuit priest, philosopher, and cultural historian, “a culture where no one has ever ‘looked up’ anything.” To subtract the technologies of information internalized over two millennia requires a leap of imagination backward into a forgotten past. The hardest technology to erase from our minds is the first of all: writing. This arises at the very dawn of history as it must, because the history begins with the writing. The pastness of the past depends on it.

It takes a few thousand years for this mapping of language onto a system of signs to become second nature, and then there is no return to naïveté. Forgotten is the time when our very awareness of words came from *seeing* them. “In a primary oral culture,” as Ong noted,

the expression “to look up something” is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might “call” them back—“recall” them. But there is nowhere to “look” for them. They have no focus and no trace.

In the 1960s and '70s, Ong declared the electronic age to be a new age of orality—but of “secondary orality,” the spoken word amplified and extended as never before, but always in the context of literacy: voices heard against a background of ubiquitous print. The first age of orality had lasted quite a bit longer. It covered almost the entire lifetime of the species, writing being a late development and general literacy being almost an afterthought. Like Marshall McLuhan, with whom he was often compared (“the other eminent Catholic-electronic prophet,” said a scornful Frank Kermode), Ong had the misfortune to make his visionary assessments of a new age just before it actually arrived. The new media seemed to be radio, telephone, and television. But these were just the faint glimmerings in the night sky, signaling the light that still lay just beyond the horizon. Whether Ong would have seen cyberspace as fundamentally oral or literary, he would surely have recognized it as transformative: not just a revitalization of older forms, not just an amplification, but something wholly new. He might have sensed a coming discontinuity akin to the emergence of literacy itself. Few understood better than Ong just how profound a discontinuity that had been.

When he began his studies, “oral literature” was a common phrase. It is an oxymoron laced with anachronism; the words imply an all-too-unconscious approach to the past by way of the present. Oral literature was generally treated as a variant of writing; this, Ong said, was “rather like thinking

horses as automobiles without wheels.”

You can, of course, undertake to do this. Imagine writing a treatise on horses (for people who have never seen a horse) which starts with the concept not of “horse” but of “automobile,” built on the readers’ direct experience of automobiles. It proceeds to discourse on horses by always referring to them as “wheelless automobiles,” explaining to highly automobilized readers all the points of difference.... Instead of wheels, the wheelless automobiles have enlarged toenails called hooves; instead of headlights, eyes; instead of a coat of lacquer, something called hair; instead of gasoline for fuel, hay, and so on. In the end, horses are only what they are not.

When it comes to understanding the preliterate past, we modern folk are hopelessly automobilized. The written word is the mechanism by which we know what we know. It organizes our thought. We may wish to understand the rise of literacy both historically and logically, but history and logic are themselves the products of literate thought.

Writing, as a technology, requires premeditation and special art. Language is not a technology, no matter how well developed and efficacious. It is not best seen as something separate from the mind; it is what the mind does. “Language in fact bears the same relationship to the concept of mind that legislation bears to the concept of parliament,” says Jonathan Miller: “it is a competence forever embodying itself in a series of concrete performances.” Much the same might be said of writing—it is a concrete performance—but when the word is instantiated in paper or stone, it takes on a separate existence as artifice. It is a product of tools, and it is a tool. And like many technologies that followed it thereby inspired immediate detractors.

One unlikely Luddite was also one of the first long-term beneficiaries. Plato (channeling the nonwriter Socrates) warned that this technology meant impoverishment:

For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom.

External characters which are no part of themselves—this was the trouble. The written word seemed insincere. Ersatz scratchings on papyrus or clay were far abstracted from the real, the free-flowing sound of language, intimately bound up with thought so as to seem coterminous with it. Writing appeared to draw knowledge away from the person, to place their memories in storage. It also separated the speaker from the listener, by so many miles or years. The deepest consequences of writing, for the individual and for the culture, could hardly have been foreseen, but even Plato could see some of the power of this disconnection. The one speaks to the multitude. The dead speak to the living, the living to the unborn. As McLuhan said, “Two thousand years of manuscript culture lay ahead of the Western world when Plato made this observation.” The power of this first artificial memory was incalculable: to restructure thought, to engender history. It is still incalculable, though one statistic gives a hint: whereas the total vocabulary of any oral language measures a few thousand words, the single language that has been written most widely, English, has a documented vocabulary of well over a million words, a corpus that grows by thousands of words a year. These words do not exist only in the present. Each word has a provenance and a history that melts into its present life.

With words we begin to leave traces behind us like breadcrumbs: memories in symbols for others to follow. Ants deploy their pheromones, trails of chemical information; Theseus unwound Ariadne’s thread. Now people leave paper trails. Writing comes into being to retain information across time and

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