

NOTE

1. Sir John R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England*, ed. John Gross (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), 12.



Information

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WHEN Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse skeptically asks Harriet Smith whether Robert Martin is "a man of *information*," a man who reads "beyond the line of his own business," she isn't inquiring about whether Harriet's would-be suitor possesses a large set of arbitrary data. Rather, Emma is questioning the breadth of his general culture, ungenerously applying a vague standard of gentlemanly cultivation to a yeoman farmer. Harriet's flustered answer suggests that she perceives the tenor of the question but struggles to frame Robert's reading habits in such terms: "Oh yes!—that is, no—I do not know—but I believe he has read a good deal—but not what you would think any thing of. He reads the Agricultural Reports, and some other books that lay in one of the window seats. . . . But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the *Elegant Extracts*. . . . And I know he has read the *Vicar of Wakefield*."¹ The utilitarian agricultural reports would fail Emma's test, the books on the window seat represent arbitrary rather than general reading, and while Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts* might bespeak a laudable impulse toward self-improvement, this popular anthology suggests not wide-ranging cultivation but efficient edification via preselected highlights. (Emma herself turns to the book as a source of riddles, and in real life, Austen had given a copy of it to a niece in 1801.) Perhaps *The Vicar of Wakefield* might pass muster.

Elsewhere, too, Austen associates *information* with general self-cultivation via reading. As a girl, Catherine Morland prefers "baseball . . . to books—or at least books of information—for, provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all." For Austen, *information* is "useful knowledge" of a particular sort. It resides not

in the raw facts of agricultural reports but in William Shakespeare (“a great store of information”) and other forms of cultivated reading, a fund of general truths for reflection.²

Shortly after Austen’s time, Geoffrey Nunberg suggests, this idea of information as general culture interacted with the granular sense of information as a particular instance of informing someone, thus by the early Victorian era helping to yield the modern “abstract” meaning of information: information as a kind of corpuscular fact able to circulate as a dematerialized flow.³ In an informatic *Aufhebung*, Emma’s sense of information as storehouse of insight removed from immediate use now amalgamates with the particularities that even Harriet recognized as non-information—the report’s systematic recording, the haphazard volume’s givenness, the textual excerpt’s removal from its context. *Information* comes to denote facts or representations that are somehow out there, independent of any specific instantiation, removed from context and materiality. In a further reversal from Austen’s informatics, bloodless, scattered abstract *information* could therefore appear quite distinct from *knowledge*, since knowledge seems to presuppose a knower who has internalized it. In 1870, J. A. Froude points to this distinction as he skeptically takes on the Victorian assumption that “larger information generates larger and nobler thoughts.” On the contrary, he argues, a scattered education in useless generalities will lead young men to become “socialists,” “trades-unionists,” “Fenians,” and readers of “the penny newspaper.” Knowledge is now the antidote for diffuse information: “The evils caused by a smattering of information, sounder knowledge may eventually cure.”⁴

Removed from context, alienated from a knowing subject, information since the mid-nineteenth century has often seemed a kind of immaterial substance, ideally suited to pass from one medium to the next in an emerging world of media multiplicity, colonial knowledge, and control at a distance. Yet this protean, general quality has made information strangely apt to adopt the material contours of its own media and formats, however stealthily. In Austen, information had lain in books to be unlocked by the correct mode of reading; even Shakespeare is a codex to be read, not a playscript or performance. But for the Victorians, information readily takes on the properties of newly invented technologies that seemed to alienate data from matter and context. Like messages on the electric telegraph, information now circulates instantly and far from its origins, an immaterial fluid that resembles Victorian descriptions of electricity. Or it comes to resemble the ranks of names,

codes, and numbers with which a *Bradshaw's Guide* translates gross movements of coal, steam, and metal into a grid of fine print, the rhythm of railway time into the visual simultaneity of the table, ordered and ready to hand yet complex and challenging to decode. In *Dracula* (1897), information—tracking the Count, the vampire-hunters often seek it by name—takes after Mina Harker's typescript, the novel's putative origin and the destination for its collage of journals, letters, news clippings, and phonograph diaries. Indeed, typing comes to represent a kind of undead for documents, sapping the essence from its originals even as it allows them to live on indefinitely in a kind of regularized, alienated form, as typewritten information.

By the end of the nineteenth century, proliferating, disjointed, insubstantial information itself could become a model for printed texts—a final reversal of Austen's bookish informatics. In George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), a character who edits the "general information column" of the mediocre journal *Chat* ("Would you be so good as to inform me . . . what was the exact area devastated by the Great Fire of London—that kind of thing") comes up with a scheme to transform it into *Chit-Chat*, a frothy assemblage of excerpted "information—bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics," that becomes the great hit of the era. The randomness and disjunction of information become formal rules: "No article" in *Chit-Chat* may "measure more than two inches in length," and those inches "must be broken into at least two paragraphs."⁵ A parody of the real weekly newspaper *Tit-Bits*, *Chit-Chat* becomes Gissing's bleak paradigm for print culture in a nascent information age.

Strategically indeterminate yet covertly medium-specific, the phenomenon of Victorian information suggests how we might analyze not just the ideas in things but the things in ideas. The history of information also offers further avenues of research into Victorian culture—for instance, into questions about what counts as information, what forms it takes, and who owns or controls it. Information's Victorian histories also indicate that the media technologies behind our own contemporary scholarship are hardly neutral, that the affordances of the digital archive, etext, and searchable database are already materially informing our ideas about the past.

NOTES

1. Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23 (emphasis mine).
2. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, in *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.
3. Geoffrey Nunberg, "Farewell to the Information Age," in *The Future of the Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 103–38.
4. James Anthony Froude, "On Progress," in *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, 2nd ser. (New York: Scribner, 1872), 262–63.
5. George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 459–60.



Institutions

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"To you the British House of Commons is everything."
 "Yes;—everything," said Mr. Palliser, with unwonted enthusiasm;—
 everything, everything. That and the Constitution are everything."
 — Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?*¹

I spent the early months of the Donald Trump administration rereading Anthony Trollope's *Barsetshire* and *Palliser* novels, a self-protective act that at first I understood as a retreat. It was only after former FBI Director James Comey testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee on June 8, 2017 that I realized why Trollope's signature form—the series of linked novels—felt newly vital: Trollope's novel sequences tell the story of institutional durability amid cultural upheaval.

During the 2016 election, James Comey was responsible both for an investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server and for a subsequent investigation into the Trump campaign's connection to election-meddling by the Russians. After President Trump abruptly removed Comey from his post at the FBI, Comey was received as a hero on the left, even by those who blamed him for Hillary Clinton's