## Big (information) history

Information history is one of the foci of interest for *Journal of Documentation*. This subject ranges from the narrow history of the information sciences and professions, to the broader historical development of libraries, information services and information management, to the still broader scope of the changing concepts and contexts of information throughout history (Black 2006, Weller 2007). These studies, naturally enough, begin with the origins recorded information, perhaps with a nod to the question as to whether earlier manifestations such as cave paintings can be counted as a form of communicable information.

There is, however, a bigger picture to be considered, as is shown by Fred Spier's new book *Big history and the future of humanity*. This is essentially the first textbook of the relatively novel 'big history' approach, pioneered by such scholars as David Christian, John Mears and Spiers himself. This, while not ignoring the usual subject-matter of history – the development of human societies and civilisations – sets it into a much wider context: the historical development of the earth and its life, itself set within the wider context of the development of the solar system, the galaxy and the universe itself. This big picture approach to history necessarily involves input from cosmologists, astrophysicists, geologists, biologists, and archaeologists, as much as conventional historians.

It is interesting to speculate whether, as information history may be seen as a branch of conventional history, there may be a 'big information history' equivalent of this new discipline. Spier provides us with some links to how this might, in fact, be the case, starting from his general thesis that big history deals, in its essence, with the emergence and decline of complexity in the universe. Complexity, Spier notes, as have others before him, is associated with information. He distinguishes three 'levels' of complexity: that of the physical universe, in which "lifeless matter can .. exhibit certain sequences and can thus carry information" (p. 25); the biological world, in which "life organizes itself with the aid of hereditary information stored in DNA molecules" (p. 27); and the world of human culture, which defines explains as "information stored in nerve and brain cells or in human records of different kinds" (p. 27). This has resonances with the ideas of those authors, for example Bates (2006) and Bawden (2007), who have considered the possibility of connections between concepts of information at these three levels.

Another of Spier's themes is that, when we come to human history, the increasing ability to disseminate information widely and rapidly is one of the major forces influencing the course of 'recent big history', leading to 'informatization' as one aspect of globalisation. Here we see an overlap between the big history approach, and more conventional information history.

It seems to me that taking a broad view of information history, and placing it within the context of a 'big information history', has advantages in encouraging a truly multidisciplinary approach to the study of information.

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