Everything has a past. Information studies, along with its nebulous object of study, has a past reaching back beyond twentieth-century milestones like the rise of personal computing and Claude Shannon’s mathematical theory of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). A sense of the plurality of information’s possible pasts may be gleaned from Geoffrey Nunberg’s playful yet serious essay, “Farewell to the Information Age” (1996) - an article surely among the top ten required readings for the iSchool movement. Nunberg’s etymological excursus, which traces the shifting and elusive meanings of the term information since premodernity, and reminds us that while everything has a past, not everything has a history. The latter, history, is the writing of the past as narrative, a form which ideally outlives the writer and persists to shape future understanding. In this sense, history is vulnerable in that it may be destroyed - as cultural heritage professionals know all too well - as well as contestable in the sense that the writing of one history may overwrite another.

History can become a vexed topic within information studies for a number of reasons. One is simply a matter of disciplinary history: traditional information studies developed over the twentieth century largely within the context of the social sciences, which focus on human behaviour as observable phenomena, and therefore concern themselves mainly with the present. By contrast, the humanities focus on texts and other products of human artifice, usually situated in some historical relationship with other texts and with one’s own act of reading. Both are essential perspectives for understanding information holistically, which is why interdisciplinarity underpins the iSchool movement. Even so, historical approaches to information find themselves swimming against the current for another reason: the relentless presentism of information culture itself. As a concept closely linked to narratives of modernity, information tends to resist the premise that it has a history, as Ronald Day explains in The Modern Invention of Information. His twofold argument asserts “not only that the history of information has been forgotten but also that it must be forgotten within any ‘metaphysics’ or ideology of information” (2008, p. 3; emphasis in original). The reason he gives holds consequences for any attempt to consider the future of information studies: “information in modernity connotes a factuality and pragmatic presence […] that erases or radically reduces ambiguity and the problems of reading, interpreting, and constructing history - problems that are intrinsic not only to historiographic construction but also to historical agency” (2008, p. 3). The challenge for anyone writing about the future of information, then, must be to remain aware of ambiguity and uncertainty as productive forces in our analyses, as opposed to mere problems to be explained away.

In a similar vein, Michael de Certeau claims there are two kinds of history-writing: “one kind […] ponders what is comprehensible and what are the conditions
of understanding; the other claims to reencounter lived experience, exhumed by virtue of a knowledge of the past” (1988, p. 35). The first of these, in Certeau’s words, “examines history’s capacity to render thinkable the documents which the historian inventories. It yields to the necessity of working out models which allow series of documents to be composed and understood: economic models, cultural models, and the like” (1988, p. 35). This mode of historical thought, Certeau points out, always has a by-product in the form of the questioning of the methodological and epistemological conditions in which history is written. (Nunberg’s piece on the history of information, cited above, would fall squarely within this category.) The other kind of history moves in a different direction; as Certeau says, it “valorizes the relation the historian keeps with a lived experience, that is, with the possibility of resuscitating or ‘reviving’ a past. It would like to restore the forgotten and to meet again men of the past amid the traces they have left” (1988, pp. 35–6). The by-product of this second kind of history tends to be narrative, which uses literary genres to shape the received past. Both forms of history show up in information studies, though they do not always sit comfortably together.

Certeau’s most important point, however, is that despite appearances, these two forms of history are not in opposition to each other, though they are in tension. The result is an historiographical paradox that also frames all speculation about the future of information: “Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice” (1988, p. 36). The reward for engaging with this tension is the uncanny feeling one gets upon realizing that the past doesn’t always stay put; sometimes it connects with the present in arresting ways, like the appearance of a ghost.

A recent example may be found in the image to the right. This is a detail from a video clip which circulated as an internet meme this past Fall. It was popularized via a YouTube video posted by a Northern Irish filmmaker, George Clarke, who had noticed something strange in film footage shot in 1928 [(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6a4T2tJaSU (retrieved April 19, 2011)]. The footage shows passers-by on the street outside the Hollywood premiere of the Charlie Chaplin film The Circus, and was included as bonus material with a DVD release of The Circus. (This explains the wooden zebra in the foreground. You can also see the sign for the Chaplin film in the window behind.) The mysterious element was the woman in the background who appears to be talking on a cell phone. As the camera follows her for a few seconds while she walks down the sidewalk, it’s clear she’s holding something up to her left ear, and she appears to be speaking into it. Of course, everyone knows there were no cell phones in 1928, but that did not prevent speculation about what we’re actually seeing here, including the notion that a time
traveller - apparently a careless one - had been caught on film. You can imagine the appeal this meme would hold for internet-procrastinators whose technological imaginations had been fed by the fringe-science fiction of J.J. Abrams and \textit{The X-Files}, as well as the alternate-history inventions of steampunk.

Sadly, the mystery was promptly explained by some historical research showing the device to be most likely a hand-held electronic hearing aid (Jackson, 2010), possibly one made by the Siemens corporation - who would, ironically, go on to make cell phones, but much later.

Although this image didn’t turn out to be a revelation about some previously unknown aberration in the history of technology, I would suggest it has a different kind of value. Instead of offering a revelation about the past, it tells us something about us, specifically about the forms of desire we attach to the past, and the technologies that focus those desires. When we’re presented with this kind of mystery, there’s a passing moment before it’s solved when it exists for us as a mystery, as something that exercises our historical imagination, and estranges the past and the present in productive ways. It’s a moment of “productive unease,” as Julia Flanders describes it, similar to “the sense of friction between familiar mental habits and the affordances of [an unfamiliar] tool” (2009, para. 12). Everyone knows there were no cell phones in 1928, but other kinds of information technology did exist then. How did those technologies weave themselves into everyday life, like the street scene captured in this image? Would this woman have considered herself part of an information culture, even if she might not have articulated it to herself in those terms? Finally, to whom could she possibly be speaking? (I would like to think she is somehow talking to maverick physicist Nikola Tesla - played in my imagination by David Bowie, reprising his role from \textit{The Prestige} - perhaps giving him a review of Chaplin’s new film.)

We can turn this image into a mirror to examine the nature of our own curiosity, too. Why was present-day speculation about the image so quick to explain the mystery device as a cell phone, an object from our present as opposed to some unknown communication device from an equally unknown future? Did she somehow bring a whole cellular network back in time with her? What kind of roaming plan did she have? The experience of the uncanny, as in the 1928 cell phone internet meme, is part of history’s predicament of finding the present in our object, and the past in our practice.

The concept of the \textit{thing} can help us see both the image and the speculation about it with different eyes. The cell-phone hypothesis and hearing-aid explanation both served to stabilize the mystery device as a recognizable object. Yet, as Bruno Latour observes, “For too long objects have been wrongly portrayed as matters-of-fact. […] They are much more interesting, varigated, uncertain, complicated, far reaching, heterogenous, risky, historical, local, material, and networky […]” (2005, p. 19). Latour’s piled-on adjectives suit the mystery device in that wonderful interval before an explanation turned it into an object. In that moment of estrangement from the stabilizing narratives of techno-history, the thing the woman holds to her ear
remains just that, a thing. Bill Brown describes the nature of things in terms that highlight the power of imagination, describing things as constituting a problem because of the “specific unspecificity that things denote” (2001, p. 3); as he argues, the semantic reducibility of things to objects, coupled with the semantic irreducibility of things to objects, would seem to mark one way of recognizing how, although objects typically arrest [...] attention, and although the object was asked to join philosophy’s dance, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over” (2001, p. 3; some emphasis removed)

It was the mystery device’s status as an unexplained thing, rather than an explainable object, which gave the meme its fleeting appeal last Fall. To pick up Brown’s metaphor, those shadowy spaces of the grand ballroom of modernity, where things lurk irreconcilably, call to mind the half-forgotten histories of information which Day describes as leading a similarly shadowy existence within information studies. Like Banquo’s spectre at the banquet in Macbeth, the past is present whether we acknowledge it or not.

Navigating all these forms of productive unease is the challenge taken up by the contributors to this special issue of the FIQ on the future of information studies. Directly and indirectly, all of the articles here address the historicity of the future by examining information objects and practices that are now in flux, transitioning - sometimes with difficulty - from past to future forms. That tension between possible pasts and futures takes a specific form in each of the articles: for Sarah Ward, it is the paradox of rarity in the emerging cultural field of e-books; for Voytek Bialkowski, Rebecca Niles, and myself, it is the problem of curricular support for the new skills that digital humanists need to integrate with traditional expertise; for Heather Schuster and Jenaya Webb, it is the challenge posed by electronic resources to print-based management in libraries; and for Doug Horne, it is the competition between libraries and new venues like Google for the facilitation of scholarly communities.

All of these writers address problems that have histories, and all of them prompt us to think about the future in relation to the past. They also serve to remind us that writing the future history of information studies can’t be done by any one disciplinary approach in isolation, nor can it be done alone - it takes a community as diverse as the one represented by these articles.

References

