# Book Review

## America's information wars

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**Colin B. Burke.** ***America's Information Wars: The Untold Story of Information Systems in America's Conflicts and Politics from World War II to the Internet Age***. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018. 390 pp. ISBN 978-1-5381-1245-8 Hardback, $85.00 (£54.95); 978-1-5381-1246-5 eBook, $80.50 (£54.95).

This is a history of efforts to provide a central information service for U.S. intelligence agencies, military services, and the State Department from the beginning of World War II to the 1960s, with some attention to later years. The technology landscape was then more varied (and more interesting) than now, with combinations of card files, microfilm, punch cards, tabulator machines, and more, and then the very gradual development of digital computing. It was very hard to store or even index really large collections before digital computers' present-day capabilities. Then as now there were the problems of language in indexing and the conflicting terminological preferences of different specialists. There were constant policy conflicts over control of information and political tensions among scholarly societies, universities, funding agencies, and government departments in the struggles for influence and control. The end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War was characterized by many organizational changes and new players, such as IBM, the National Science Foundation, and, later, pressures for open access.

The author has decades of experience researching these aspects of this period and has published on higher education, the development of technology, and espionage in this period. He has specialized in shedding light on the reality behind much-hyped but unsuccessful programs such as MIT's Project INTREX and Vannevar Bush's efforts at information retrieval and cryptanalysis.

This book is, in effect, a continuation of his *Information and Intrigue: From Index Cards to Dewey Decimals to Alger Hiss* (MIT Press, 2014) about Herbert Field (1868–1921) and his zoological information service, the Concilium Bibliographicum. That book, like this one, paid attention to the evolving national, even international political and technological context. This book begins with Archibald MacLeish, the Librarian of Congress, collaborating with "Wild Bill" Donovan to provide information services to Donovan's new Office of Strategic Services, the direct ancestor of the Central Intelligence Agency. The intelligence agencies and the

military had generous funding but the work was mostly secret and the technology was proprietary so honest accounts and documentation, if any, are scarce. Fortunately Burke, at one time Scholar in Residence at the National Security Agency, has long experience in dealing with federal records and secret files.

The book is structured in short chapters with endnotes, a bibliography, and more is available online. The narrative ranges widely. The author enjoys digressions and likes telling stories about individuals' personal lives.

The names of some actors, such as Jesse Shera and Allen Kent, are more or less familiar in library and information science, others will be new. Their actions in this story have been hardly known to anyone. That is an important point. There has been a gap in the public record, let alone historical accounts. The very important encyclopedic work by C. P. Bourne and T. B. Hahn, *A history of online information services, 1963–1976* (MIT Press, 2003) has a different, dryer style, a different emphasis, and a later focus.

The material presented appears accurate, with very few typos. It is a rich, thick, well-documented historical narrative, exceptional in its attention to context, and tells a previously untold story.