# Too Much To Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before The Modern Age
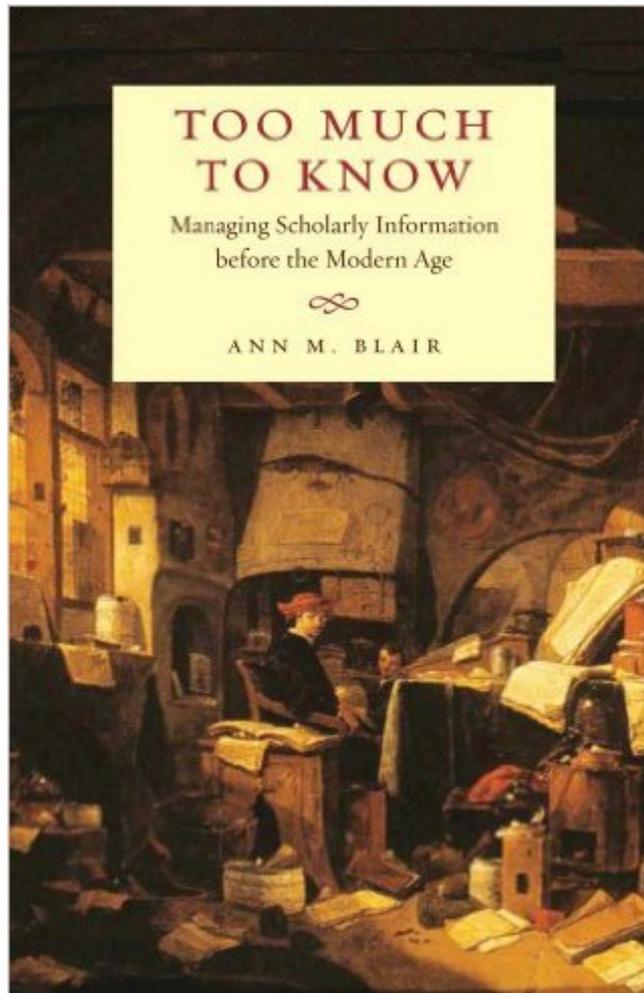
**TOO MUCH TO KNOW**

Managing Scholarly Information
before the Modern Age

ANN M. BLAIR

# Synopsis

The flood of information brought to us by advancing technology is often accompanied by a distressing sense of â œinformation overload,â • yet this experience is not unique to modern times. In fact, says Ann M. Blair in this intriguing book, the invention of the printing press and the ensuing abundance of books provoked sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European scholars to register complaints very similar to our own. Blair examines methods of information management in ancient and medieval Europe as well as the Islamic world and China, then focuses particular attention on the organization, composition, and reception of Latin reference books in print in early modern Europe. She explores in detail the sophisticated and sometimes idiosyncratic techniques that scholars and readers developed in an era of new technology and exploding information.

# Book Information

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# Customer Reviews

Ann Blair is a historian of staggering erudition, on the one hand, and breath-of-fresh-air common sense, on the other. *Too Much to Know* describes the long and complicated history of things that often don't seem to have a history at all, like information overload, and the effect of new media on how we think, and more. Blair shows how many of the unnerving effects of the internet, for instance, were discussed anxiously in past centuries as well, and attributed to other technological innovations. But her point is not that the impact of today's technologies are just like those of earlier technologies (the view expressed by Abe Simpson: "Why the fax machine is nothing but a waffle iron with a phone attached!"). She shows that people in earlier centuries faced challenges that were

at once their own - a product of their unique circumstances - and at the same time not entirely unlike those that we face today. After reading this book, you understand a lot more about early modern European culture. And you also understand a bit more about our own culture. Which is why, to my mind, this is as good as historical writing gets. There's great humanity in this book, and wisdom.

I am not sure that the long list of blurbs that appear on the  page for this book do it any favours. To read them you would think (I did) that this is a choice morsel of up-the-intellectual-market poolside reading; i.e. fascinating-in-itself. It isn't. This is a scholarly contribution to the history of reference books and book structuring technology, written in efficient and scholarly, but definitely not sparkling prose. It is never going to be lauded as gripping, and if you do not have an active interest in the minutae of early modern intellectual culture, then you are surely going to come to a juddering halt inside a dozen pages in your attempt to read it. This is not to run the book down - it is just to represent it fairly. If, on the other hand, you do have an active interest in [...etc] then there is worthwhile stuff here to add to your pile; just don't plan on starting the pile here. Certainly, Prof. Blair has done an intimidating amount of work in the archives in preparation - just thinking about it is enough to make me feel like removing my imaginary glasses and rubbing my eyes.Recommended with those caveats.P.S., One particular thing that I found surprising - I mention this because I was expecting it from early on - it seemed to be signposted, but it never appeared - is that while Prof. Blair discusses attempts to track the use of reference books in early scholarly work, she is fairly pessimistic about how possible this is. I immediately thought of Jean Seznec's 'the survival of the pagan gods', which has some lovely and to me very striking work on tracking the use of reference books over time. If you plan on reading 'too much to know', then it would be worth taking a look there too (or maybe Prof. Blair thinks Seznec is misguided, but she does not take time out to dismiss him - he is not in the bibliography).

I waited 6 months for this book to finally be available. I was thrilled when it was delivered; then horrified to read that the author had chosen to leave out all the Latin, Greek and other foreign language footnotes, referring the reader to a website instead! The footnotes are often, to me, the most interesting part of the book, and to have them deleted because some readers may not know Greek or Latin is criminal.In addition, the author, instead of using an accepted citation style, such as MLA or APA, has chosen to invent her own cryptic citation format.I am enjoying the book so far. But I am wondering how much I am missing; how much the author chose to leave out. What a shame.Colby Glass, Professor Emeritus

I enjoyed this book a lot, learned a great deal, and will be tracking down several of the Works Cited. My one complaint about "Too Much to Know" is about a tremendous irony in it--on the one hand, she writes on page 144 about why printed indexes were "easier to use" than manuscript indexes: "Entries in printed indexes always appeared at the beginning of a new line rather than being run onto the previous line to save space as in some manuscript indexes." On the other hand, this book's second-level index entries run together without carriage returns in dense blocks, making them very difficult to search through. I assume that this is the publisher's fault and not Blair's, but as "finding devices" go this book's index could use some improvement.

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