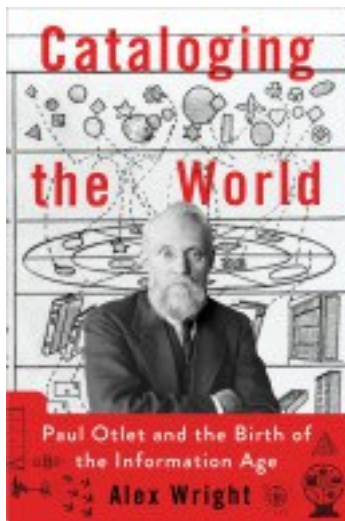# Cataloging the World

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The dream of capturing and organizing knowledge is as old as history. From the archives of ancient Sumeria and the Library of Alexandria to the Library of Congress and Wikipedia, humanity has wrestled with the problem of harnessing its intellectual output. The timeless quest for wisdom has been as much about information storage and retrieval as creative genius.

In Cataloging the World, Alex Wright introduces us to a figure who stands out in the long line of thinkers and idealists who devoted themselves to the task. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Paul Otlet, a librarian by training, worked at expanding the potential of the catalog card, the world's first information chip. From there followed universal libraries and museums, connecting his native Belgium to the world by means of a vast intellectual enterprise that attempted to organize and code everything ever published. Forty years before the first personal computer and fifty years before the first browser, Otlet envisioned a network of "electric telescopes" that would allow people

everywhere to search through books, newspapers, photographs, and recordings, all linked together in what he termed, in 1934, a réseau mondial--essentially, a worldwide web.

Otlet's life achievement was the construction of the Mundaneum--a mechanical collective brain that would house and disseminate everything ever committed to paper. Filled with analog machines such as telegraphs and sorters, the Mundaneum--what some have called a "Steampunk version of hypertext"--was the embodiment of Otlet's ambitions. It was also short-lived. By the time the Nazis, who were pilfering libraries across Europe to collect information they thought useful, carted away Otlet's collection in 1940, the dream had ended. Broken, Otlet died in 1944.

Wright's engaging intellectual history gives Otlet his due, restoring him to his proper place in the long continuum of visionaries and pioneers who have struggled to classify knowledge, from H.G. Wells and Melvil Dewey to Vannevar Bush, Ted Nelson, Tim Berners-Lee, and Steve Jobs. Wright shows that in the years since Otlet's death the world has witnessed the emergence of a global network that has proved him right about the possibilities--and the perils--of networked information, and his legacy persists in our digital world today, captured for all time.

作者介绍:

Alex Wright is a professor of interaction design at the School of Visual Arts and a regular contributor to The New York Times. He is the author of Glut: Mastering Information through the Ages.

目录: "The story of Paul Otlet (1868-1944), Belgian librarian and utopian visionary, who, long before the digital age, dreamed of a worldwide repository of media, accessible to all. As Wright explains in this shrewd, brisk biography, cataloging books was only one of Otlet's aims--he 'saw little distinction between creating a new classification of human knowledge and reorienting the world's political system.'... Wright ends his illuminating story in the present, where Otlet's thoughts about the connection of information to knowledge, and knowledge to insight, are still urgent." --Kirkus Reviews
"Alex Wright has placed Paul Otlet's life and work in up-to-this-minute context to bring us the illuminating biography of a pioneering information activist whose grand vision of a world of universal knowledge, freely available to all, is here to remind us that we would be foolish to settle for anything less." --George Dyson, author of Turing's Cathedral
"This wonderful, carefully researched, and well-written book draws us into the question: to what extent does the ambitious work of Paul Otlet make him the prophetic analog father of the Internet? Alex Wright is careful not to overstate the significance of Otlet. But the ambiguity of Otlet's influence, not to mention his long and eventful life and passionate dreams of world peace, in fact makes him more, not less, interesting." --Charles B. Strozier, Professor of History at John Jay College and the Graduate Center at The City University of New York, and author of Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst
"Alex Wright's beautifully written book illuminates the life and work of Paul Otlet, one of a group of information theorists and utopians whose achievements during the early part of the last century prefigure the digital world, and whose innovation underpin the 'information society' in which we live. Cataloging the World is a lively, sympathetic but rigorous exploration of the ways in which what might seem merely of historical interest proves of immediate and engrossing relevance." --W. Boyd Rayward, University of

Illinois and University of New South Wales
"With profound insight, Alex Wright reveals that within the labyrinth of Paul Otlet's Mundaneum lies hidden an anticipation of the hyperlinked structure of today's Web. This is not only a captivating biography of Otlet's prophetic vision of a global networked information system but a vivid account of how similar systems took shape in the minds of Conrad Gessner, Leibniz, Vannevar Bush, Tim Berners-Lee, and many others." --Wouter Van Acker, Griffith University
"Finally a historical study of the Information Age not starting with Vannevar Bush. Alex Wright's balanced study of Paul Otlet's dream to catalogue the world as one of the many successive projects of unifying knowledge on a global level is a joy to read after the autohagiographies of engineers that claimed their share in the 'invention' of the Internet and World Wide Web in purely computer-and-information-technical terms." --Dr. Charles van den Heuvel, University of Amsterdam
"An excellent study of a Belgian, Paul Otlet, who in the late nineteenth century began 'a vast intellectual enterprise that attempted to organize and code everything ever published'... Relevant of course to the origins of the web, Wikipedia, and current sites such as Vox.com." --Marginal Revolution
"A remarkable read in its entirety, not only in illuminating history but in extracting from it a beacon for the future." --Brain Pickings
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评论

if you want to start a revolution, you should start from the bottom. bad, bad biography padded with unrelated details.

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